500 FOOTBALLERS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

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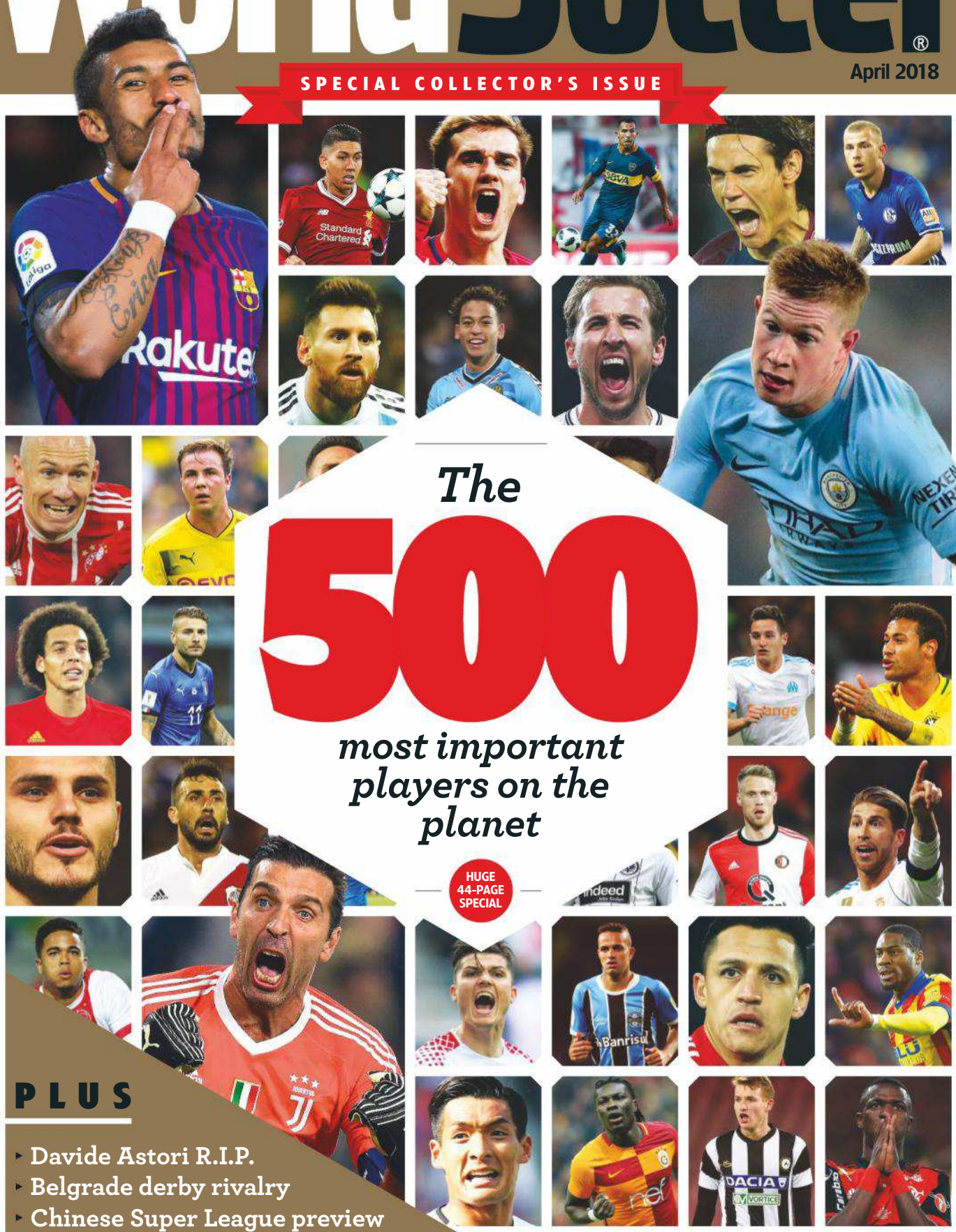
April 2018

SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S ISSUE



The 500 most important players on the planet

HUGE 44-PAGE SPECIAL

PLUS

- Davide Astori R.I.P.
- Belgrade derby rivalry
- Chinese Super League preview

“Art of Football bring out
the beauty in the game's most
memorable moments” Copa90

“Art of Football capture classic
moments in a vibrant,
contemporary style” The Guardian

“Art of Football get it.
those split-second moments
are treasured memories and their
artwork captures them in a
classy and stylish way" Ball Street

“Art of Football's shirts capture
the vibrancy of the game
like no other” Dirty Tackle

“Art of Football - where the
beautiful game comes to life”
Hitesh Ratna, Editor, FourFourTwo

“The Art of Football team create
truly unique and authentic content
that is designed to emotionally connect
real fans to the biggest moments
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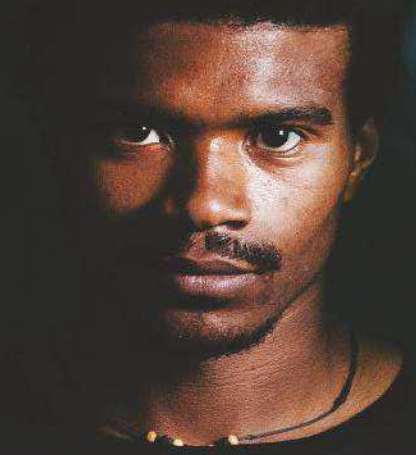

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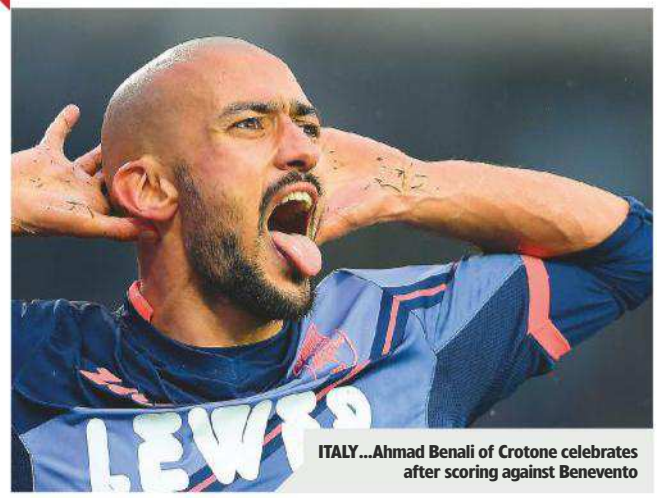
In Pictures

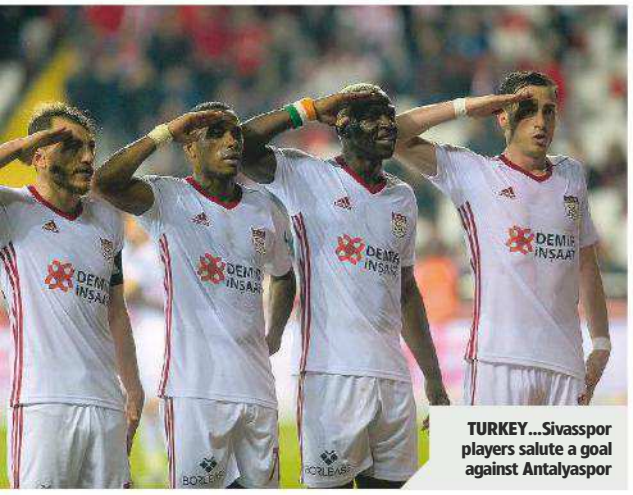
The global game caught on camera

DENMARK...with the pitch covered in snow, fans drink beer and watch the game between Hobro and Copenhagen from a pitch-side hot tub at the DS Arena in Hobro



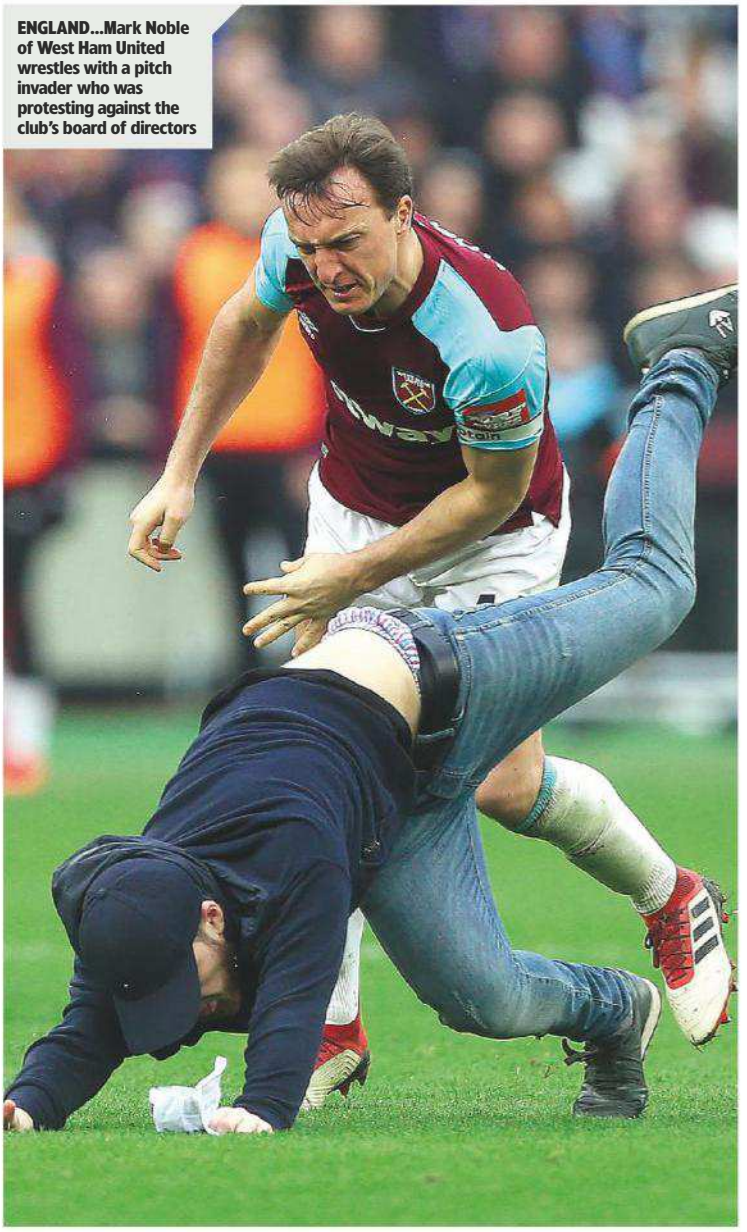
ITALY...Ahmad Benali of Crotone celebrates after scoring against Benevento

BRAZIL...Henrique of Vasco da Gama is fouled by Mauricio Pinilla of Universidad de Chile

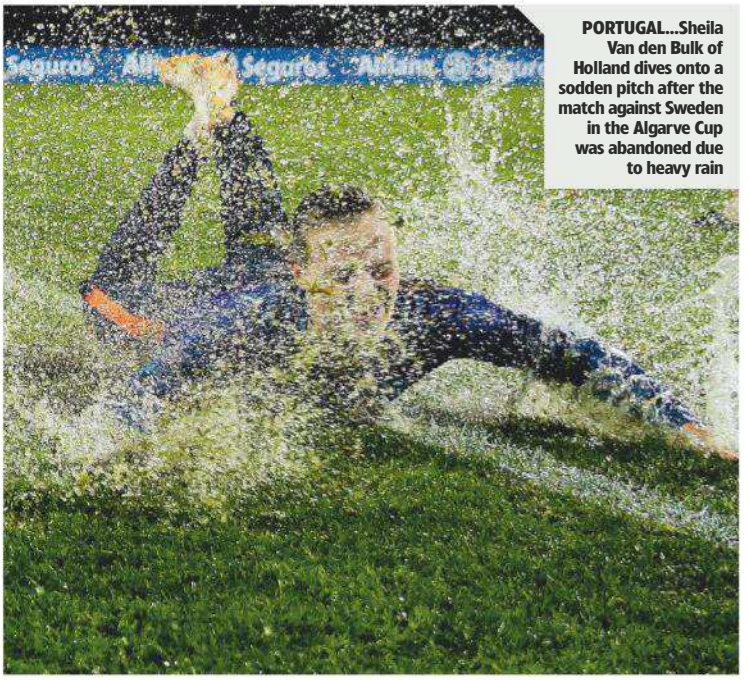


TURKEY...Sivasspor players salute a goal against Antalyaspor

ARGENTINA...Argentinos Juniors fans at the game against Boca Juniors at Diego Armando Maradona stadium in Buenos Aires



ENGLAND...Mark Noble of West Ham United wrestles with a pitch invader who was protesting against the club's board of directors



PORTUGAL...Sheila Van den Bulk of Holland dives onto a sodden pitch after the match against Sweden in the Algarve Cup was abandoned due to heavy rain

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FROM THE EDITOR

This month we publish our annual list of the world's 500 most important players. It is a subjective list, designed to provoke debate as much as inform. But I hope that there will be names on the list that are new or unfamiliar.

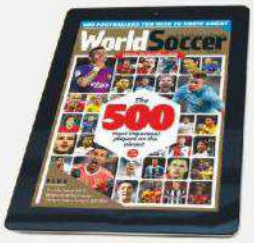
It makes a refreshing change to be able to focus solely on players, but it is impossible to avoid the decision of the International Board to approve video refereeing. It may be a milestone in the history of the game but it is not a decision that is universally popular. Nor will it be an easy process to introduce.

The danger for FIFA is that games at the World Cup in Russia will feature a VAR system that has not been sufficiently tested. Last year's Confederations Cup raised more questions than it answered.

> The danger is that games at the World Cup will feature a VAR system that has not been sufficiently tested

Opinions are already heavily divided over VAR; different columns this month from Jim Holden (page 12) and Paul Gardner (page 16) reflect that divide. The debate is likely to intensify over the coming weeks and we plan to return to the subject next month with reports on existing VAR trials across the globe, from England to the USA, via Holland, Germany and Italy.

See you then.



Gavin Hamilton, Editor

10 SIGNIFICANT EVENTS THIS MONTH

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SWITZERLAND

VAR gets World Cup green light

Football's lawmakers have approved the use of video refereeing – which means it will be in operation at the World Cup this summer.

The decision by the International Football Association Board vindicated the opinion of FIFA president Gianni Infantino. For the past year, the he has been trumpeting his confidence in the application of VAR in Russia on the expected unanimous vote of approval from the annual general meeting of IFAB in Zurich.

FIFA Council will formally approve the use of VAR at the World Cup when it meets in Colombia, and a statement after the meeting from IFAB described the decision as a "historic step for greater fairness in football".

Monitor...referees will get pitch-side help

Infantino said: "As of today, video assistant refereeing is part of football. We hope and encourage a favourable decision in this respect because we are very positive about VAR."

IFAB's decision was taken despite the steady trickle of controversy which has accompanied testing, notably in elite club football with the best referees such as those in Germany, Italy and lately England.

The last thing FIFA needs is for VAR to be "the story" of the World Cup, where many referees will have had no serious experience of its operation in high-pressure competitive football.

The stated objective of VAR is not to achieve 100 per cent accuracy but "to correct 'clear and obvious errors' and deal with 'serious missed incidents' in defined match-changing situations (goal, penalty/no penalty, direct red card and mistaken identity for disciplinary sanctions".

If a "clear and obvious" mistake is spotted, the incident can be reviewed and changed. The referee, who has access to a pitchside monitor, can also initiate a review.

Concern...Holzmuller

The main criticism directed at its implementation in domestic competitions has been an absence

"We are not going back, we will continue the fight for transparency and a better football"

Greece's deputy sports minister, Giorgos Vassiliadis (right), announces the suspension of the league following a gun protest by PAOK owner Ivan Savvidis

of communication for fans, the time taken over reaching a decision and hence the puncturing of excitement over goal-scoring.

FIFA intends to address this concern before the World Cup. Johannes Holzmuller, head of FIFA technology innovation says: "Our idea is that after the final decision is taken by the referee on the pitch we would like to show in the stadium the selected replay that was used by the referee and VAR."

Confusion over practical implementation is one of the reasons why UEFA has decided not to implement VAR in the Champions League next season. UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has talked of "confusion" over its application.

The Premier League has also baulked at using VAR next season, though this will leave it out of

step with the other members of the "Big Five" leagues since France and Spain will be following the lead of Germany and Italy.

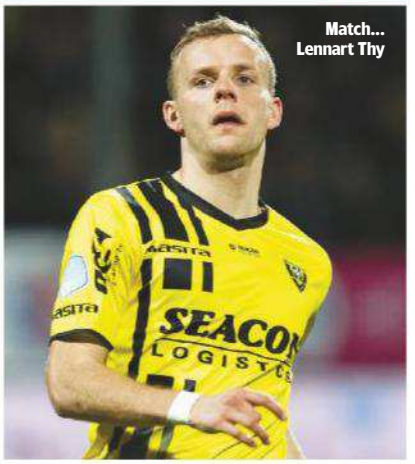
Infantino, an opponent of technology when he was general-secretary of UEFA, has changed his mind on the basis of the trial results monitored by the University of Leuven. He says: "I would say to the fans, players and coaches that this will have a positive impact. That is what the results of the study show. From almost 1,000 live matches that were part of the experiment, the level of the accuracy increased from 93 per cent to 99 per cent. It's almost perfect."

Infantino says he had been "pretty much against" the system until "we looked into all the details and benefits it can bring", adding: "Of course, we need to speed up the reviews and the communication to the referees that are applying it but also for the general public."

IFAB also approved the idea of allowing teams to use a fourth substitute in extra time of games after experimentation.

Keir Radnedge

HEROES & VILLAINS



Match... Lennart Thy

LENNART THY

VVV-Venlo's German striker opted to miss a Dutch league game because he had agreed to give blood to a leukaemia patient with a DNA match.

GIANLUIGI DONNARUMMA

The Milan keeper saved two spot-kicks in the semi-final shoot-out as his side beat Lazio 5-4 on penalties in the Italian Cup semi-finals after the match finished 0-0.

ANTOINE GRIEZMANN

Two hat-tricks in three days helped the Frenchman to 100 goals for Atletico Madrid and become the first player from the club to score back-to-back trebles.

LAUTARO MARTINEZ

Became only the second player ever to score a hat-trick for an Argentinian club against a Brazilian side in the Libertadores Cup as he helped Racing to a 4-2 win over Cruzeiro.

Treble...Lautaro Martinez gets ahead of Cruzeiro

IVAN SAVVIDIS

The Greek Superleague was suspended after the PAOK owner ran onto the pitch with a gun to protest when rivals AEK Athens scored against his side.

Trouble... Savvidis (centre)

RUBEN SEMEDO

The Villarreal defender was arrested and charged with a series of offences, including attempted murder, robbery and illegal possession of weapons, and ordered to be held in custody without bail.

Semedo, 23, who joined Villarreal from Sporting last summer was allegedly involved in an incident in a which a man was abducted and threatened with a gun.

"Ruben was a victim of fraud, a large-scale swindle, probably of a financial nature," said his agent Catio Balde

"Against this situation he didn't react in the best possible way, but he was the victim."

Arrested...Villarreal's Ruben Semedo

ARTHUR MASUAKA

The West Ham United player was sent off for spitting at an opponent during his club's FA Cup defeat at Wigan and handed a six-match ban.

VITORIA AND BAHIA

The derby match in the Bahia state championship was abandoned with 11 minutes remaining after nine players were sent off in a game that was marked by a mass punch-up between players from both sides.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

The 2018 World Cup needs ABV: Anything But VAR

Suffering with VAR ...Gigi Buffon

They are all World Cup winners. They are all intelligent heroes of football. And they have another thing in common: they hate VAR.

Listen to the voices of Ossie Ardiles, Gigi Buffon and Berti Vogts when you consider FIFA's decision to introduce video assisted refereeing at the World Cup this summer.

Ardiles has watched it in action and says: "VAR is making the best game in the world degenerate into a farce. It is just a mockery of the game."

Buffon, still playing and now suffering with VAR, admits: "It is no longer football – it's turning into water polo. It takes too long. It ruins the entertainment factor."

Vogts is equally adamant, adding: "The way things are going, football will be held up to ridicule. Football lives off emotion. Now we have to wait before we can celebrate. It beggars belief. We simply can't destroy our beautiful sport."

Ardiles, Buffon, Vogts. We might call it ABV: Anything But VAR.

Some are listening. UEFA, to its credit, has opted not to use the system in next season's Champions League and Europa League competitions. The Premier League in England has also seen the troubles with technology, heard the hostility of spectators and players, and will do without.

Sadly, common sense is absent at FIFA, which is blindly rushing ahead. It wants to be the revolutionary guard and it is taking a mighty gamble with its prestige World Cup tournament.

> Common sense is absent at FIFA, which is blindly rushing ahead. It wants to be the revolutionary guard and it is taking a mighty gamble

FIFA president Gianni Infantino justifies it with the claim that – after experiments this season in the Bundesliga, Serie A and the FA Cup – "it's almost perfect".

This is from the Donald Trump school of "fake news". How can it be almost perfect when large sections of football fans in all three countries intensely dislike what they have seen? How can it be almost perfect when a poll of Bundesliga players conducted by *Kicker* magazine found that 47 per cent wanted it scrapped?

The motive for introducing VAR is to improve "justice" in football, to get more decisions correct.

FIFA say that the current experiments have increased accuracy from 93 per to 99 per cent. Nobody watching the game can believe this – not unless, for example, you think that ruling a player offside by a few millimetres after three minutes of replays is "increasing accuracy".

Actually, what it is doing is dramatically decreasing the fun of football, the enjoyment of the game for people who pay to watch in the stadium or on television.

That is what Ardiles, Buffon and Vogts so eloquently address – the destruction of the most powerful emotion in football: the celebration of a goal.

Those who support VAR point to the use of video replays in sports like rugby and cricket to emphasise and explain their position, but I never understand this. If you attend rugby and cricket matches, as I do, the frequent and lengthy delays to decision-making are infuriating to spectators.

What has also happened in both sports is a change in the mentality of the referees and umpires. They have become far more cautious and nervous in their officiating, and will opt for video reviews at the slightest opportunity.

This will be the case in football with VAR. Most refereeing decisions are a matter of interpretation rather than absolute fact. One ref will see an incident as a foul, another will not – and that will be true whether it is live action or watched on a replay.

The delays will not improve accuracy very much, certainly not enough to be remotely worthwhile. But they will kill the emotion of the game.

The wise old World Cup winners know this with all their hearts.

"We simply can't destroy our beautiful sport," said Vogts.

Oh yes we can. WS

Unimpressed...Berti Vogts (left) and Ossie Ardiles both dislike VAR

"It's a fiasco. My worst moment as a coach"

Zinedine Zidane, on Real Madrid's cup exit to Leganes

GOALS we'd like to see again

1 FRED
Shakhtar Donetsk v Roma
Pin-point free-kick curled into the near top corner off the underside of the bar.

2 CRISTIANO RONALDO
Real Madrid v Paris Saint-Germain
Finishes great build-up play by heading home at the far post.

3 SAUL NIGUEZ
Atletico Madrid v Lokomotiv Moscow
Runs with the ball before briefly hesitating and then unleashing a left-foot thunderbolt of a shot from 40 yards.

4 JAMIE VARDY
Leicester City v West Bromwich Albion
Lets a long pass from Riyad Mahrez drop over his shoulder before volleying low into the corner without looking at the goal.

5 EVERALDO STUM
Queretaro v Necaxa
Spectacular bicycle kick into the top corner from the edge of the penalty area.

6 CIRO IMMOBILE
Lazio v Cagliari
In the fifth minute of injury time, he meets a cross by Felipe Anderson with a scorpion kick from the edge of the penalty area to earn a 2-2 draw.

WINNERS

GREMIO
The Brazilian club secured their third title in 17 months with a Recopa Sudamericana victory over Independiente.

CHAMBLY & LES HERBIERS
Both third-tier clubs beat Ligue 1 sides to set up a Cup semi-final against each other.

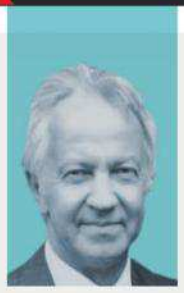
EUPEN
Scored four goals in the last 20 minutes to avoid relegation from the Belgian top flight on goal difference.

REAL MADRID
Led 1-0 after the first leg of their cup quarter-final with Leganes, but lost 2-1 at home and went out on away goals.

JORGE WILSTERMAN
Beat Vasco da Gama 4-0 in the Libertadores to draw 4-4 on aggregate but lost on penalties.

SANCHEZ WATT
Asked three times for his name by a ref who booked him, he was sent off for dissent for replying "Watt" three times.

LOSERS



Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

USA bid fears complacency

For runaway favourites, the USA and junior partners Canada and Mexico are making heavy weather of the 2026 World Cup bid which FIFA Congress will judge on June 13 in Moscow.

No one questions the central tenets of the proposal: a multiplicity of fine stadia, all the essential transport links and infrastructure, more than adequate funding, plus guaranteed high visibility for as many sponsors as the world football federation and local organisers can round up.

Yet it appears that the bid has been spooked by a sudden realisation that bid quality is not the be all and end all of a FIFA vote.

United 2026 has fallen victim to the "C word" – complacency.

Too much reliance has been placed on a sense that FIFA "owes" the 2026 finals to the United States to make amends for the embarrassing loss to Qatar in the 2022 bidding.

Ex-FIFA president Sepp Blatter continues to blame Michel Platini and Nicolas Sarkozy for wrecking his Nobel Prize-targeted dream of balancing out the old Cold War enemies Russia and US – just as he continues to lambast England as bad losers over its own bid ballot humiliation.

But even Blatter has queried the United 2026 strategy, pondering why bid leaders seem so afraid of self-promotion.

One key factor goes back to the failure of the US to qualify for Russia this year, which cost Sunil Gulati his long-term presidency.

Once he decided it was time to go, the USSF turned inward ahead of elections and took its eye off the 2026 ball for which it had greatest responsibility, given that the USA would stage 60 of the 80 games.

Finally the bid leadership was entrusted jointly to the three federation presidents: newly promoted Carlos Cordeiro (USA), Steve Reed (Canada) and Decio De Maria – who then announced, with inopportune timing, that he would be quitting as Mexican federation supremo when his three-year term ends in September.

Support...Mexico's interior minister Alfonso Navarrete and tourism minister Enrique De la Madrid get behind the bid

De Maria explained his decision was due to internal wrangling concerning the league format and television complications, but he had also taken a media hammering over Mexico's comparatively minor role in the proposed allocation of 2026 World Cup matches.

> Too much reliance has been placed on a sense that FIFA "owes" the 2026 finals to the United States

On top of this, several of the prospective US venue cities have baulked at FIFA's organisational demands.

Meanwhile, the Canadian government proffered only a lukewarm "support in principle" the day before Vancouver fell off the wagon.

Officially the United leaders "dropped" Vancouver, but they had little option after the British Columbia provincial government raised concerns about cost which the bid committee could not answer.

BC Premier John Horgan said that, while he would like to see the World Cup come to Vancouver, he was not about to write "a blank cheque" to FIFA. Tourism minister Lisa Beare followed up by stating that "we cannot agree to terms that would put British Columbians at risk of shouldering potentially huge and unpredictable costs".

Canada, of course, has long and bitter memories, from the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, of major sports organisations bringing the party to town and then leaving the hosts to clear up the financial mess.

So, it would seem reasonable to

suggest that all this would be good news for Morocco, the only rival bid.

Morocco, however, has its own challenges on all fronts, with little more to show FIFA's evaluation taskforce than artists' projections of their new and rebuilt stadia.

Not that "blue-sky bidding" did their fellow Arabs from Qatar any harm, of course. But the danger for Morocco is that a centrally controlled evaluation team – featuring both FIFA deputy secretary-generals Marco Villiger and Zvonimir Boban – needs to find a safe, controversy-clear host for 2026 and for president Gianni Infantino.

Morocco needs to convince the taskforce it can do the job – and this is not a given. Hence a social media and press conference flurry. If Morocco can convince the taskforce then, in an open vote in congress, anything could happen.

And this is before even trying to assess the "Donald Trump factor". WS

Premier League break or breakdown?

Just as Italian football comes up with a Christmas/New Year fixtures schedule so the English Premier League comes around to the notion that a winter break is a good idea.

An experimental winter break will be staggered.

Five Premier League matches would take place on one weekend, with five on another. This means Premier League clubs would have at least 13 days without a match.

The first two-week interval would be scheduled from the 2019-20 season and take place in February.

FIFAGate rumbles on, slowly...

The sentencing of Jeff Webb – ex-vice-president of FIFA, ex-head of CONCACAF, ex-banker for Jack Warner – on corruption charges has been delayed until September. Presumably he has more to tell the FBI in bargaining down his sentence.

Warner himself has won a further stay of extradition from Trinidad & Tobago courtesy of the latest legal manoeuvrings of his expensive lawyers.

Finally, Marco Polo del Nero should learn his FIFA ethics fate very soon. The suspended head of the Brazilian CBF was indicted way back in 2015.

ESM XI FEBRUARY 2018

Paul GARDNER

THE WORLDWIDE VIEW

VARiations on a theme

While the majority response to VAR has probably been favorable, there have been serious hiccups. It has proved a total flop in Australia, and it didn't work well at the 2017 Confederations Cup. In Germany, Stuttgart fans rolled out banners demanding "Abolish Video Referees", while the Brazilians have voted it down – probably for financial reasons – and England's Alan Shearer has described it as "a shambles".

This had looked like a no-brainer; a sure way of banishing those horribly embarrassing moments when genuine goals were disallowed, fouls outside the area were called as penalty kicks and so on. VAR brings in an extra official whose job is to all incidents involving goals, penalty kicks and red cards, and inform the referee immediately he detects a "clear and obvious error". Surely no one could object to that? Even refs liked the idea. What could go wrong?

Well, quite a lot, as it happens. Inevitably the VAR idea got linked in people's minds with goal-line technology. But GLT relies on science; no human judgment is involved. Quite different from VAR, where the only technology used is the replay – which is assessed by humans.

Where many people expected scientific objectivity, they find the same old fallible humans. To add further annoyance, this is an anonymous human closeted away in some obscure location.

A crowning irritation is that the VAR's "video reviews" take time. The comment from Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri that games "could last three or four hours" no doubt exaggerated a bit, but delays of several minutes have occurred.

Fans do not like these gaps in the action and, so we are told, VAR will learn to speed-up its decision making. But pressure to do things quickly is the very thing that gets a referee into trouble – which is the very thing the introduction of a VAR was supposed to avoid.

Even if corrections can be made, VAR will still suffer from a deeply built-in fault. With its reliance on referee judgments, it inherits the pro-defence bias of referees.

Howard Webb last year oversaw the use of VAR in 149 MLS games in the USA. Reporting on the results, he denied any pro-defence bias, pointing out that while the system had denied 11 "scoring chances", 11 were created. But this is ingenuous.

The fact is that VAR can cancel a goal very easily, but it cannot "create" a goal. In football, goals are not awarded, they have to be scored. VAR can, of course, allow a goal that the ref has ruled out but that is a comparatively rare occurrence. Awarding penalty kicks or dangerous free kicks is as close as VAR comes to creating goals.

> "It would be a mistake to use VAR technology in Russia, the system has not been clarified" Sepp Blatter

Despite his extensive experience with VAR, Webb still cannot make up his mind. He says the positive thing in one interview: "The game's all about goals...if we have the opportunity to allow a legitimate goal surely that's one of the best uses of video review."

But in another interview he extols VAR rather differently, saying: "The chance of a goal being scored with a player two yards offside has been dramatically reduced by this. The chance of a player scoring a goal with a hand ball has been dramatically reduced."

Until the pro-defence bias is completely eliminated from all refereeing decisions, VAR will serve merely to confirm what are, in effect, anti-goal decisions. Which will make matters worse, because the VAR decisions are wrongly believed to carry a sort of scientific accuracy.

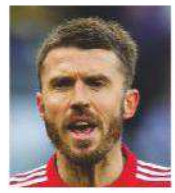
VAR is being given no respite. Despite the controversies that it has caused, FIFA is determined to use it – ready or not – at the World Cup this year.

Sepp Blatter, who always felt that refereeing and technology was not a good mix, makes the point that the World Cup is not the place for experiments, arguing: "It would be a mistake to use VAR technology in Russia, the system has not been clarified."

There can be no denying that VAR will correct the more glaring errors. But unless the accompanying drawbacks can be overcome, it may prove to be more trouble than it's worth. WS

Delay...Paul Tierney awaits a VAR decision

"There comes a time when as much as you don't like it, it's time to stop playing football. That's pretty much where I'm at"



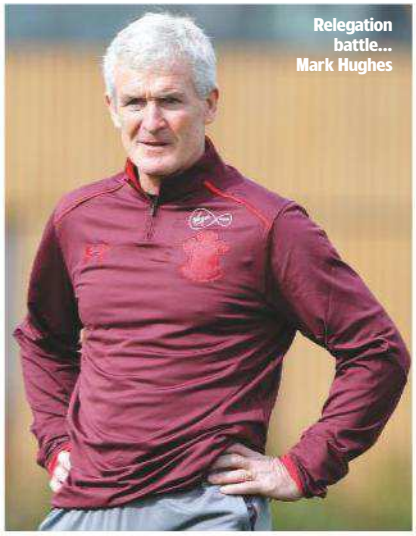
Michael Carrick faces up to retirement

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Appointments, sackings and loans

IN

New boss... Bruno Labbadia



Relegation battle... Mark Hughes

BRUNO LABBADIA replaced Martin Schmidt as Wolfsburg coach with the team just one point above the Bundesliga relegation play-off place.

RONNIE MCFALL, who led Glentoran to the league title in 1981, returned to manage the Northern Irish club after a 33-year absence.

MARK HUGHES, who was sacked by Stoke City in January, replaced Mauricio Pellegrino as manager of fellow Premier League strugglers Southampton until the end of the season.

EUROPE

Barcelona have agreed an option to buy Brazilian midfielder **ARTHUR** from Gremio in the summer.

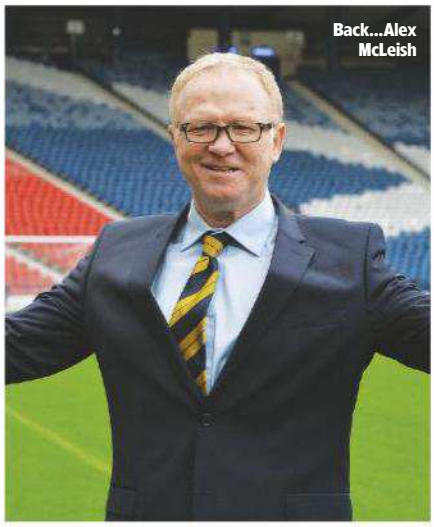
AFRICA

Former Gambia, Burkina Faso and Kenya coach **PAUL PUT** took charge of Guinea. **AHCENE AIT-ABDELMALEK** was appointed coach of South Sudan.

ASIA

GRAHAM ARNOLD, who is currently in charge of Sydney, will replace Bert Van Marwijk as Australia's coach after this summer's World Cup in Russia.

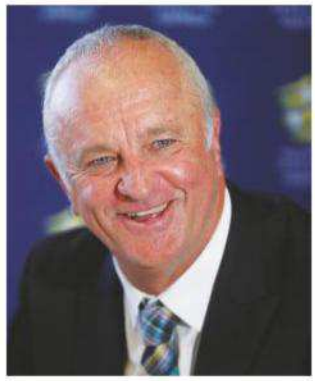
Former Georgia and Afghanistan coach **PETAR SEGRT** took charge of the Maldives national team.



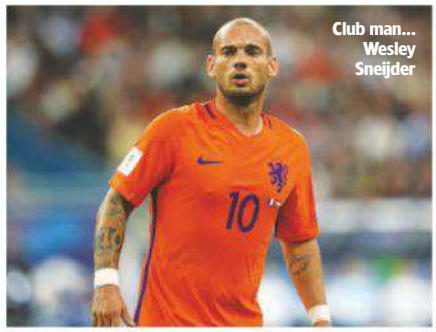
Back...Alex McLeish

McLeish takes charge of Scotland for a second time

ALEX McLEISH, who was in charge of Scotland for 10 games in 2007, was appointed manager of the national side for a second time. **STANIMIR STOILOV**, who has twice led Bulgaria, took charge of Kazakhstan, while **BERNARD CHALLANDES** was named coach of Kosovo.



Summer swap...Graham Arnold



Club man... Wesley Sneijder

Sneijder quits Holland

Holland's most capped player of all time with 133 appearances, **WESLEY SNEIJDER** – who now plays for Al Gharafa in Qatar – announced his international retirement.

OUT

EUROPE

Manchester United midfielder **MICHAEL CARRICK**, who has been capped 34 times by England, will retire at the end of the season and is likely to take up the club's offer of a first-team coaching role.

Hamburg sacked coach **BERND HOLLERBACH** after a 6-0 defeat at Bayern Munich left them seven points from Bundesliga safety.

OWEN COYLE quit as Ross County manger with the club three points adrift at the bottom of the Scottish Premiership.

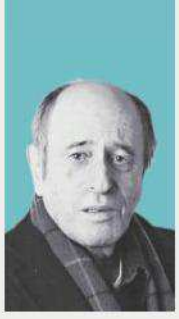
CONCACAF

USA striker **CHARLIE DAVIES**, who returned to playing despite suffering severe injuries in a car crash in 2009, announced his retirement aged 31. He scored four goals in 17 internationals and was with Philadelphia Union last season.

ASIA

Signed for €42m in 2016, Colombian striker **JACKSON MARTINEZ** was released by Guangzhou Evergrande after failing to make their 31-man squad for the new Chinese Super League season.

Gone...Bernd Hollerbach



Brian GLANVILLE

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

If England boycott the World Cup, so should everybody else

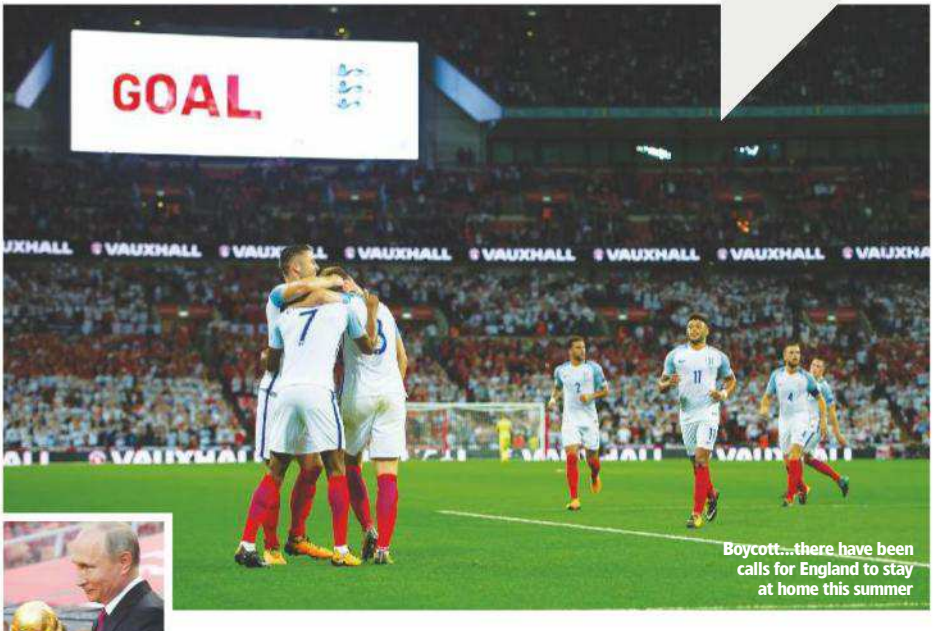
And so to what might be termed the 64,000 dollar question. Should England, in the light of the horrific poisoning in Salisbury, be sending their team to the coming World Cup? The pressure is growing and we even have the editor of Germany's most popular paper, *Bild*, demanding that both we and the Germans withdraw.

It is a vexed and troubling question, but I suggest that there is a valid answer. That England should withdraw if everybody else does. Which, of course, they won't.

England plainly have the most valid reason for withdrawing since the atrocity took place on English soil. But were they to do so, what impact would it have if no other countries followed our example?

After all, what semblance of a withdrawal from competition in Russia was there not so long ago when, in contrast to the latest outrage, it was known how and by whom the Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned in London? Indeed, it would take years before any retaliatory action was taken; and that Russian miscreant now sits comfortably and prosperously in their (impotent) political assembly.

Whether or not England take up their place at the World Cup finals, they will be seen to have been manipulated by the appalling Vladimir Putin; an attitude which will be easily communicated to an ill-informed and passive electorate.



Boycott...there have been calls for England to stay at home this summer

Atrocity...Putin

West Ham's top-shelf millionaires are on their way out

It seems all too abundantly plain that West Ham United should never have moved into the Olympic stadium. The outbreak of violence which disfigured their recent game there against Burnley so shockingly emphasising the fact.

True, the capacity dwarfs that of Upton Park, with 56,000 crowds commonplace. But even if the current rent paid by West Ham is derisory, to the mass of supporters it seems like a bad bargain.

As one of its senior fans has said: "To put it in the broadest possible terms, a number of West Ham fans feel like we have been sold a lie, on how much money the club would invest on player recruitment, a lie on what the change of stadium would do to the finances, and a lie on the way the operation is going to be run."

He speaks of a "lack of trust in the owners", the top-shelf millionaires as you might call them, David Sullivan and David Gold. This inept organisation has a contract which will run for many more years, but they will clearly now be superseded.

Sad indeed that Trevor Brooking, long such an admirable and magisterial inside-forward for West Ham and England, should be condemned to watch the chaos from his seat in the stand.

I still think Brooking, who did briefly and successfully manage the Hammers for a while, would have been an excellent manager of England.

Protest...West Ham fans vent their anger

A note on Ronaldo and Rafa

Clumsy...Ronaldo fouls the France keeper in the 1998 World Cup Final

Curious how short football journalistic memories are. There have been two salient examples in a leading popular daily. One concerned the original Brazilian centre-forward Ronaldo, with a eulogy which mysteriously made no mention of what befell him before and during the 1998 World Cup Final in Paris between Brazil and France.

Before the game he succumbed to a sudden spasm which left him briefly unconscious on his bed. He was rushed to a clinic where doctors could find no cause of the attack.

When the teams for the Final were announced, his name was not among them. And when the team-sheets were delivered to the press shortly before kick-off, Ronaldo's name was still not there. Then suddenly, at almost the last moment, there it dramatically was. But why?

In the event he lurched through the game, the whole of it, once committing a clumsy foul on the French goalkeeper which was utterly untypical of him.

On returning to Brazil he was examined again, but nothing relevant was found. First, what had caused the spasm? Second, what possessed Brazil not only to put him on the field but also to keep him there so long?

> What possessed Brazil to put Ronaldo on the field?

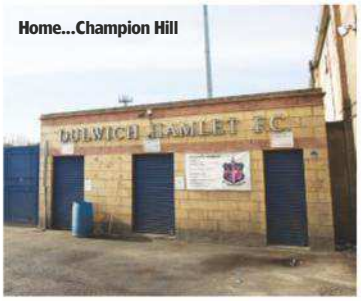
The other error concerned the European Cup Final in which Liverpool recovered from a three-goal half-time deficit to force extra-time and beat Milan on penalties.

The author gave credit to Rafa Benitez – when the fact was that Liverpool turned the table not because of their manager but despite him.

In the first half Liverpool had allowed Kaka to run riot. The true hero was Liverpool's captain, Steven Gerrard, who insisted that the German midfielder Dietmar Hamann should be brought on to mark Kaka.

This Hamann impeccably did, Kaka vanished, Liverpool scored three goals and then went on to prevail on penalties.

Dulwich Hamlet deserve better



Home...Champion Hill

It was a great relief to hear that Dulwich Hamlet, that fine 127-year-old club, might continue to exist.

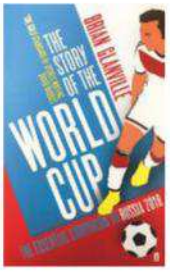
This after a bruising conflict with Meadow Residential, the company that has just turned them out of the ground, exiled them across London and wants to build on that hallowed turf.

Dulwich Hamlet, of course, had their great days as an amateur club. Now amateurism doesn't exist, but Hamlet have still managed to stay afloat.

They have been given generous temporary residence far across London, but now the local council is trying to buy their Dulwich site back from the owners.

One must earnestly hope that they will succeed and that it will not take so long.

But to try, as it has been reported, to stop them, as Meadow are allegedly doing, using their name, borders surely upon the vindictive.



A new edition of Brian Glanville's book, *The Story of the World Cup: 2018*, is published by Faber & Faber (£15.99)

Wenger's stay of execution

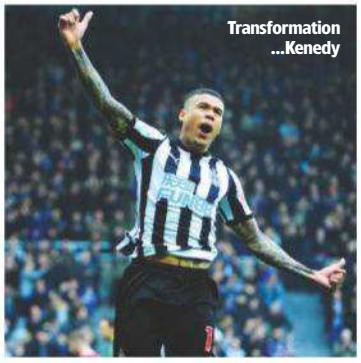
Will Arsene Wenger stay? Suddenly in the space of a few days his faltering Arsenal side have risen from the tomb. No one could seriously and optimistically have expected them to do anything other than go down to a Milan team in ebullient form at San Siro.

Yet what did they do but win the game 2-0 in some style, largely subduing a previously buoyant Milan attack and counter-attacking successfully in the old, original Arsenal style.

Following this, with a much changed team that didn't even include the likes of that resilient playmaker Jack Wilshere, they won 3-0 at home to Watford.

Wenger, as we know, has another year on his managerial contract, and although various names have been bruited as his successor, it will be that the Gunners will keep him on for another year.

Tale of two strikers



Transformation ...Kenedy

Strange how certain transfers can work out. I think in particular of two attackers, 21-year-old Kenedy, the Brazilian who has joined Newcastle United on loan from Chelsea, and the Serbian, 23-year-old Aleksander Mitrovic, who has left Newcastle for Fulham.

A strong, fast player, Kenedy has never had an extended chance at Chelsea, but he has instantly begun to score some important goals for the Magpies.

At 6ft 3in, Mitrovic has been exactly the striker Fulham so badly needed and, like Kenedy, instantly began to score important goals.

Kenedy has transformed the chances of Newcastle to avoid relegation after leaving Chelsea, whose manager Antonio Conte was arguably much too quick to unload their striker par excellence, Diego Costa, who is back again and scoring goals for Atletico Madrid.

20 YEARS OF SPEED

WHAT THE MERCP

Spanning 20 years of iconic Mercurial design, the second incarnation of the "What The Mercurial" features nine distinctive elements combined into one premium release.

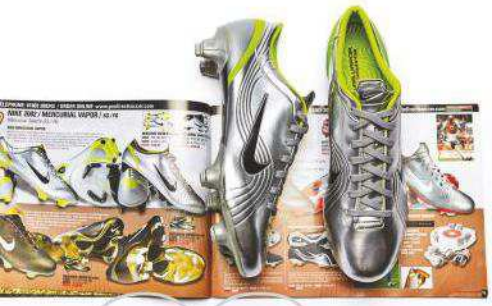
From the distinctive pattern of the original Mercurial made famous by Ronaldo, to the shimmering Swoosh seen on the Superfly IV Black Gala, two decades of pure speed are immortalised in this limited edition release, with only 1,998 pairs worldwide.

Check the timeline below for a closer look at some of the most significant moments and our journey alongside the Mercurial from then to now.

18

MERCURIAL SUPERFLY 360 ELITE
WHAT THE MERCURIAL

WHEN THE MERCP



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MERCURIAL VAPOR I

MERCURIAL VAPOR III

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MERCURIAL VAPOR IV

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20 YEARS TOGETHER

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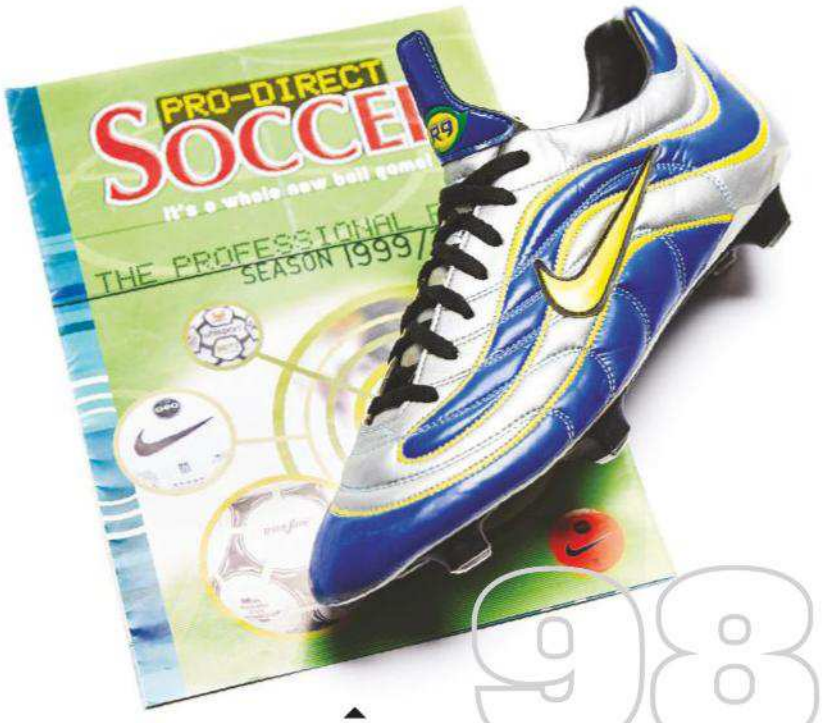

98

MERCURIAL R9

Since 1998 the quest for speed has seen the Mercurial defy expectation, and at Pro:Direct Soccer, we have been there every step of the way.

From Ronaldo to Ronaldo, Rio to Russia – the Mercurial collection has become one of football's mainstays and boasts strong visual features that are instantly recognisable.

WHO THE MERCP

1998 - R9 ARRIVES

Bursting onto the scene in bold fashion, the Mercurial makes its World Cup debut along with its poster boy. Bright and brash in colour, these boots rebuffed black boot purists and became a pioneer for many of the daring colourways seen today.

2002 - REDEMPTION

Perhaps the match Ronaldo is most famous for, the Brazilian's brace against Germany secured his nation's fifth World Cup title. Despite not playing a single qualifying game due to injury, he ended the tournament with eight goals and the Golden Boot.

2006 - RECORD BREAKER

His final win at a disappointing World Cup for Brazil, this goal against Ghana made Ronaldo the tournament's all-time leading record goal scorer with 15 goals. This record was broken in 2014 by another Mercurial wearer, Miroslav Klose.

MERCURIAL VAPOR SUPERFLY II ELITE

10

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MERCURIAL VAPOR VIII

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WHAT THE MERCURIAL

eye witness

Paddy Agnew reports

ITALY

Football pays tribute

Calcio stunned by Astori's sudden death

The city of Florence came to a standstill to pay tribute to Davide Astori, the 31-year-old Fiorentina captain who died in his sleep at the team's hotel in Udine, on the eve of a game against Udinese.

A day of civic mourning was declared for the day of Astori's funeral, when a crowd of 10,000 was in attendance outside the Basilica Santa Croce. A minute's silence was held and businesses shut their doors across the city

A few days later, at the Stadio Artemio Franchi, Fiorentina played their first game since Astori's sudden passing. The first-team squad and coaching staff all wore replicas of his number 13 shirt – which has been retired by the club – as they warmed up before playing Benevento.

During the game, with 13 minutes on the clock, the ball was kicked into touch and the entire stadium joined together for 60 seconds of continuous applause.

Fans displayed a purple mosaic, with "Davide 13" spelled out in white and red, while a banner read: "There are men who never die. There are stories that will be passed on forever. Travel well, captain."

On the final whistle, Fiorentina's players fell to the ground on their knees in tears, exhausted by the emotional toll of the day's events.

Astori's sudden death had prompted huge distress in the Italian football community. Within minutes of the news the previous weekend, Cagliari players, who were warming up for their intended lunchtime game at Genoa, made it clear they wanted the game postponed. Many of the Cagliari players knew Astori well as he spent six seasons with the Sardinian club, playing in 174 Serie A games for them. That day's Serie A programme was cancelled, including the Milan derby.

When Astori failed to show at 9.30am for breakfast on Sunday, his team-mates were surprised. When the player failed to respond to knocking on his door, hotel staff entered to find the player still in his bed but already dead.

Udine state investigator Antonio de Nicolo confirmed that, according to the state pathologist, Astori had most probably died peacefully in his sleep during the night, saying: "His room was absolutely in order. We found nothing which would suggest that this event was linked to the consumption of any substance that could have caused his death."

Capped 14 times, Astori played for Cagliari, Roma and Fiorentina, and leaves behind him his partner, Francesca Fioretti, and their two-year old daughter, Vittoria.

On his Facebook profile, he described

Emotional...Fiorentina's Milan Badelj is comforted by referee Fabrizio Pasqua at the end of the game against Benevento

Tribute...Fiorentina fans pay their respects

himself as a "footballer by chance", a description which says much about his understated sense of self, notwithstanding an obviously highly successful 11-year career in Serie A.

Among the thousands of tributes to Astori that poured in, perhaps one of the most significant came from Italy captain, goalkeeper Gigi Buffon, who said: "You were the best expression of an older football world, one that has moved on but one that was based on altruism and elegance." WS

Funeral...Astori's coffin is carried into the Basilica Santa Croce

eyewitness

Steve Menary reports

BELARUS

Unlucky 13th in Borisov?

BATE have won 12 league titles in a row but their rivals are closing the gap

As the snow melts and ice daggers crash down from the roofs of Minsk, football in Belarus is re-emerging. And amid the thaw, a change is occurring.

Most countries that came from the break-up of the Soviet Union barely register at club level due to poorly funded leagues often plagued by corruption, but not Belarus.

BATE Borisov made their Champions League group-stage debut in September 2008 at the Bernabeu, where they lost 2-0 but were not disgraced.

Since then, four subsequent qualifications have brought Barcelona (twice), Milan, Bayern Munich, Roma and Porto to Belarus.

"It's funny," reflects BATE secretary Andrei Vashkevich. "Everyone wants tickets for the European games and supports us, but at home everyone wants us to lose."

BATE stands for Borisov Automobile and Tractor Electronics, and the original side were a factory team who were successful at amateur level but collapsed in 1984.

In 1996, Belarusian businessman Anatoli Kapski revived the club. "He said, 'if we are doing this, we are going to do it properly and we are going to win'," says Vashkevich.

The club won successive promotions from the third tier to the Premier League and won the title in 1999. Since then, BATE have claimed 13 titles – including the last 12 in a row.

Last season BATE needed a point from their final game to edge out Dinamo Minsk but were losing 3-1 to Gorodeya with 12 minutes to go. A penalty was won, but there were no takers.

After missing a penalty a decade earlier, Vitali Rodionov had eschewed spot-kicks, but he stepped up to score. Then, in the third minute of injury time, the veteran striker bagged an equaliser.

That result typifies BATE's resolve. Kapski is still in charge, the club has only ever had five coaches, it signs few foreigners and does not pay bonuses for a draw. Only victories matter.

> "Everyone wants tickets for European games, but at home everyone wants us to lose"
>
> **BATE's Andrei Vashkevich**

There is, however, a domestic challenge on the horizon, with Dinamo Brest joining Dinamo Minsk and Shakhtyor Soligorsk in challenging BATE's dominance.

Dinamo Brest won the Belarus Cup last year and took the first trophy of this campaign by beating BATE 2-1 in the Super Cup, in Radoslav Latal's first game as coach. "The time has come for a change," says Victor Radkov, the club's business development officer.

Like many in Belarusian football, Radkov feels that a 16-team league is far too big. Certainly the expansion from 12 clubs in 2014 to 14 a year later and then

Small...FC Minsk Stadium has a capacity of just over 3,000

Success...Dinamo Brest celebrate winning this year's Super Cup

16 in 2016 seems curious as most eastern European leagues are shrinking.

The reason is politics, which dominates every aspect of life in Minsk and looks to have seen off another "challenger" club.

Krumkachy were formed in 2011 by a handful of Belarusians who met on Internet forums and began playing seven-a-side in Minsk. Led by the enigmatic Denis Shunto, in 2014 they hired the Sport Olympic Stadium in Minsk and paid $2,000 to enter the bottom rung of the league. "We wanted to see what we could achieve," says Shunto.

Within two seasons Krumkachy were in the top flight, but their rise upset some in Belarusian football as this success was achieved through having a good coach, Oleg Dulub, and less well-paid players.

"In the Premier League, we had one

Problems... Dmitri Gerchov, BFF director of communications

player who was also working in McDonalds," says Shunto. "He had previously been in our second team and worked his way up. If that was in Iceland and that player had succeeded there it would be a good thing. But in our country it is a sign of shame.

"When we started in the higher league there was some prejudice as we had small salaries compared to others of $300 to $1,000. Then clubs started cutting their salaries to get closer to us.

"There was a time, seven or eight years ago, when no one would play for less than $3,000 dollars a month; today $2,000 dollars is a good salary."

By 2017, Krumkachy were averaging crowds of more than 1,000 at home, but they ran into cash problems. A mystery investor was found in Armenia but the club missed a deadline for disclosing information this year and now face relegation to the third tier.

For Krumkachy fans the demotion is punishment for Shunto openly criticising the Football Federation of Belarus (BFF) president, Sergei Roumas, who is an ally of the country's hardline political leader, Alexander Lukashenko.

When two clubs, Isloch and Luch, were only fined seven and 10 points respectively for match fixing, Shunto gave Roumas an "F grade" for his organisation of the league in a media interview.

"Usually the federation helps out other clubs that miss the deadline," says Shunto, who admits he should have spoken to Roumas in person first. Four meetings between the pair have failed to break the deadlock.

> "In the Premier League, we had one player who was also working in McDonalds"
> **Krumkachy's Denis Shunto**

Only Krumkachy and BATE are privately owned, the rest of the Premier League receive some form of state support. And while BATE, Dinamo Minsk, Brest and Shakhtyor can draw gates of 5,000 or more, clubs such as FC Minsk only attract a few hundred fans.

Clubs charge on the gate but there is no money from television rights, which were picked up for virtually nothing by German gambling company Laola.

"The problem is that television channels say to us there is no market and they cannot sell advertising," says Dmitri Gerchov, director of communications at the BFF.

The Laola deal did bring broadcast crews, which enabled the BFF to stream games and the 2018 Super Cup was live on state TV. The BFF wants to charge for rights to boost the revenue streams at the clubs.

According to UEFA, aggregate top tier revenue in Belarus was €35million in 2016, with 18 per cent coming from UEFA, 21 per cent from commercial income and the rest classified as "other revenue", which is typically the subsidy.

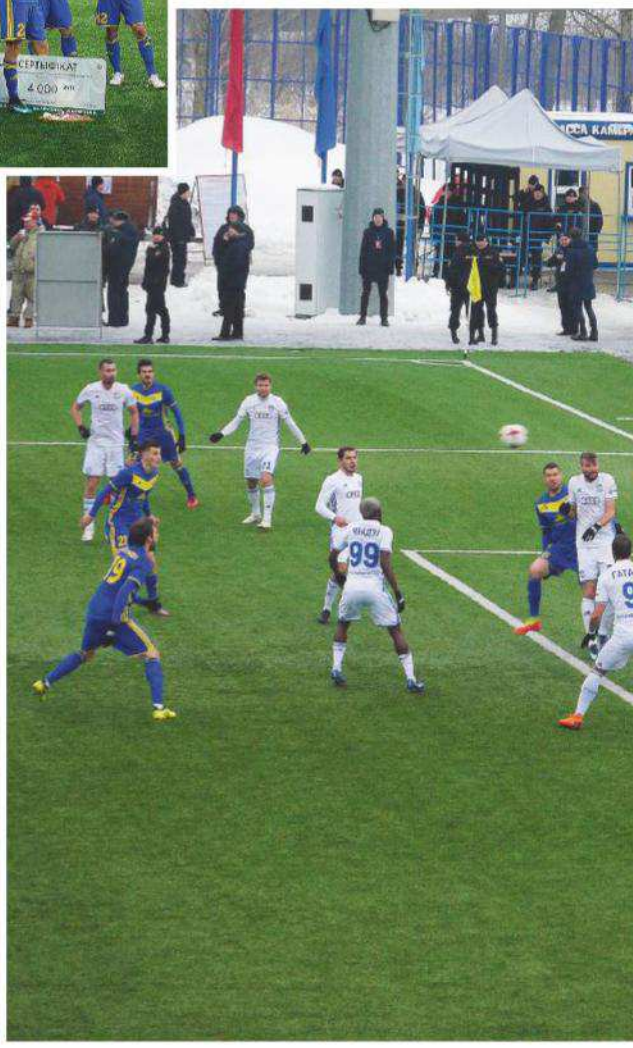
Shunto says: "The only way to make money is sponsorship and advertising – but the market is so small – or by selling players or playing in Europe."

In 2016, aggregate revenue in the Belarusian Premier League fell 10 per cent after BATE failed to qualify for the Champions League, but 11 seasons of taking part has earned the club more than €65m.

"Without playing in Europe, the club could not continue like this. It's a high risk strategy," admits Vashkevich.

In 2017-18, BATE only received €1m after losing in the third qualifying round of the Champions League but dropped

Dejected... beaten BATE



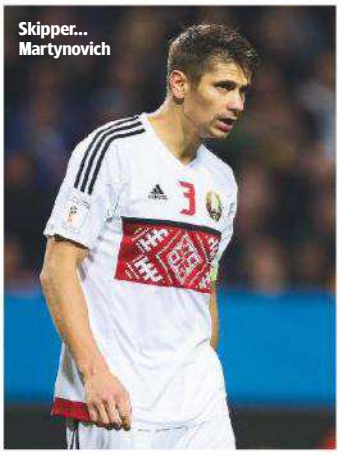
MOVERS & SHAKERS

● IGOR KRUISHENKO
National coach who twice won the title with BATE and secured a debut Champions League group-stage qualification in 2007. Made an impact with provincial side Torpedo BelAZ before taking the Belarus job in March 2017.

Icon...Hleb

● ALEXANDER HLEB
Starred in the Bundesliga for Stuttgart and in the Premier League for Arsenal before joining La Liga giants Barcelona in 2008. Plagued by injuries, the last of the 36-year-old's 77 international appearances was in March last year.

● ALYAKSANDR MARTYNOVICH
Belarus captain who was with Dinamo Minsk before leaving for Russia's Krasnodar in 2010. Spent the 2015-16 season on loan at Ural Yekaterinburg.



Skipper... Martynovich

● SERGEI ROUMAS
Chairman of state bank Belagroprombank since 2005, he spent time working in the military and government and was elected Football Federation of Belarus president in 2011, being re-elected four years later.

● EDUARD MALOFEEV
Played in the 1966 World Cup for Russia before coaching Dinamo Minsk, who he led to the Soviet Top League title. Coached the Soviet Union from 1984 to 1986 and, at 75, is now back at Dinamo Minsk.

into the Europa League group stage, which guaranteed €2.6m. BATE then picked up €360,000 after beating Cologne, while home and away draws with Red Star Belgrade each earned €120,000.

This season Dinamo Minsk won through two qualifying rounds of the Europa League and earned €440,000 before falling to AEK Larnaca.

In 2014-15 they reached the group stage, and despite finishing bottom they managed a famous victory away to Fiorentina and pocketed €2m in the process. They reached the group stage again in 2015-16, finished bottom once more with a single win over Czech side Viktoria Plizen, but earned €3.3m. That same season BATE picked up €18.1m for making the Champions League group phase.

Another title win for BATE this year would put them on a par with Norway's Rosenberg, who have 13 successive championships, while the record is 14, held jointly by Latvia's Skonto Riga and Lincoln Red Imps of Gibraltar.

"If we win 15, then I don't think anyone can break that record," says Vashkevich. "It would stand for ever and everyone would remember BATE." WS

Record...BATE secretary Andrei Vashkevich

Live...the Super Cup was broadcast on state TV

Belarusian Premier League 2018

1 BATE BORISOV
The winners of the last 12 titles have appointed Oleg Dulub to sustain that run. After a spell in Ukraine with Karpaty Lviv and Chornomorets Odessa, Dulub, who brought success to Krumkachy, is only BATE's fifth coach in 22 years.

2 DINAMO BREST
Well-supported club from near the Polish border who won the cup last year but fell at the first attempt in Europa League qualifying this term.

3 DINAMO MINSK
Founded in 1927 and played in the Soviet Top League for 39 of its 54 seasons and winning the 1982 title. Were league runners-up last year.

4 DNEPR MOGILEV
From eastern Belarus, champions in 1998 but relegated twice since.

5 GOMEL
Founded in 1959 as Lokomotiv Gomel, they won the league in 2003 and ran Liverpool close in the 2012-13 UEFA Cup. Returned to the top flight last season, after winning the 2016 First League.

6 GORODEYA
Founded in 2004 as a futsal side and started playing XI-a-side three years later. Promoted to the Premier League in 2015.

3 ISLOCH
Founded 11 years ago and played regional football until joining the second tier in 2012. Turned pro a year later and reached the Premier League in 2015.

3 KRUMKACHY
Emerged from the Minsk streets in 2011 and reached the Premier League in 2015 but have run into money problems.

3 LUCH MINSK
Led by ambitious young coach Ivan Bionchik, they were formed in 2012 and won the First League in 2017 – despite a 10-point deduction for match fixing.

3 FC MINSK
Established in 2006 and went straight into the First League after taking Smena's licence. Narrowly avoided being relegated in 2017.

7 NEMAN GRODNO
Founded in 1964 and won the cup in 2014. Coached by former national under-21 boss Igor Kovalevich.

8 SHAKHTYOR
The country's third-biggest side had a $3.5million budget in 2017 that helped secure a Europa League slot but they were eliminated in the first qualifying round by Lithuania's Suduva Marijampole.

9 SLUTSKSAKHAR SLUTSK
Founded in 1998, they were promoted to the top flight in 2013.

Revamp...the Dinamo Stadium in Minsk is expected to be finished by mid 2018

10 SMOLEVICHY-STI
Formed in 2009 they are making their Premier League debut this term after finishing First League runners-up last year. Coached by Aleksander Brazevich, who spent part of last season in Lithuania with Zalgiris Vilnius.

11 TORPEDO BELAZ
From Zhodino, they took the name BelAZ as part of a sponsorship from a local factory. Have played in the Europa League three times since 2010 and won the cup in 2016 – with coach Igor Kruishenko leaving to take the national job a year later.

12 VITEBSK
The north east-based club were twice Premier League runners up in the 1990s.

The 500 most important players...

How and why we selected the *World Soccer* 500 for 2018

Another year, another *World Soccer* 500. As with previous years, it is not intended to be a list of the "best" 500 players in the world. It's impossible to compare players from different leagues and continents; any list is inevitably subjective. We have endeavoured to compile a list of the world's most talked-about players – the most newsworthy who, by definition, are the most important.

As with previous years, we began by drawing up a list of the key players by league – starting with 60 each for the leading leagues in Europe (England, Germany, Spain), 50 for France and Italy, between 15 and 25 for middle-ranking leagues, and ending with between five and 10 for smaller leagues.

We tried to include players who fell into five different categories:

1 In-form players who have starred in their respective domestic league during the current 2017-18 season.

2 The young talents who have earned rave reviews in the past year.

3 The internationals who will be key figures for their respective national sides at the 2018 World Cup finals in Russia.

4 Players who are likely to be key figures in the summer transfer market.

5 Those who have made the headlines off the pitch.

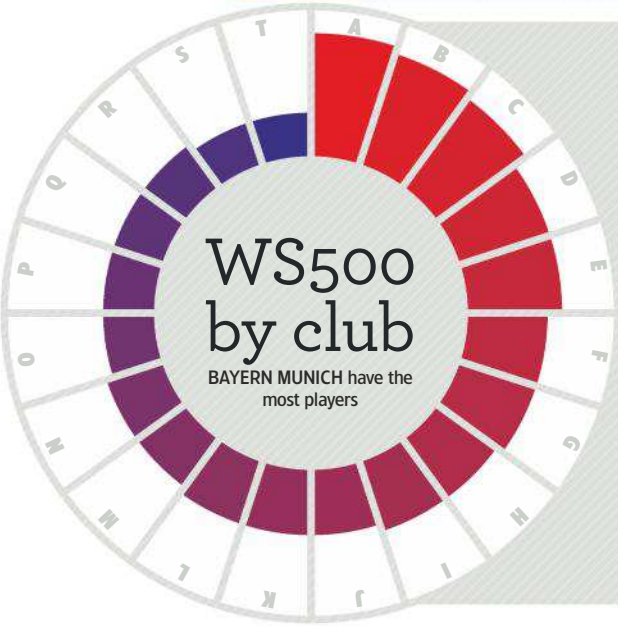
Reaching the final list was not easy. There are many players who missed the final cut but who came very close.

A new element this year is the inclusion of players who could make an impact at this summer's World Cup. So there are more players from likes of Morocco, Senegal and Serbia, and one from Panama, as well as fewer players from countries such as USA and Holland, who missed out on the finals.

This is not intended to be the definitive list – merely one to provoke debate and discussion.

● *Read more about the 2018 WS500 at worldsoccer.com*

Leading the way... Brazilian midfielder Jadson of Corinthians



A) Bayern Munich	17
B) Real Madrid	16
C) Manchester City	15
D) Barcelona	13
E) Juventus	13
F) Atletico Madrid	11
G) Paris Saint-Germain	11
H) Monaco	10
I) Tottenham	10
J) Chelsea	9
K) Napoli	9
L) Porto	9
M) Dortmund	8
N) Leverkusen	8
O) Ajax	7
P) Internazionale	7
Q) Manchester United	7
R) Milan	7
S) Lyon	6
T) RB Leipzig	6

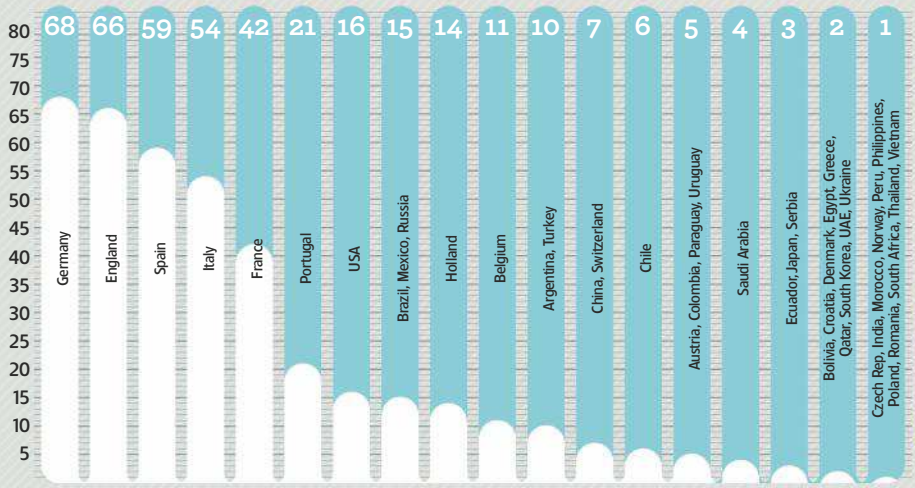
WS500 by nationality

THERE ARE 40 BRAZILIANS ON THE LIST

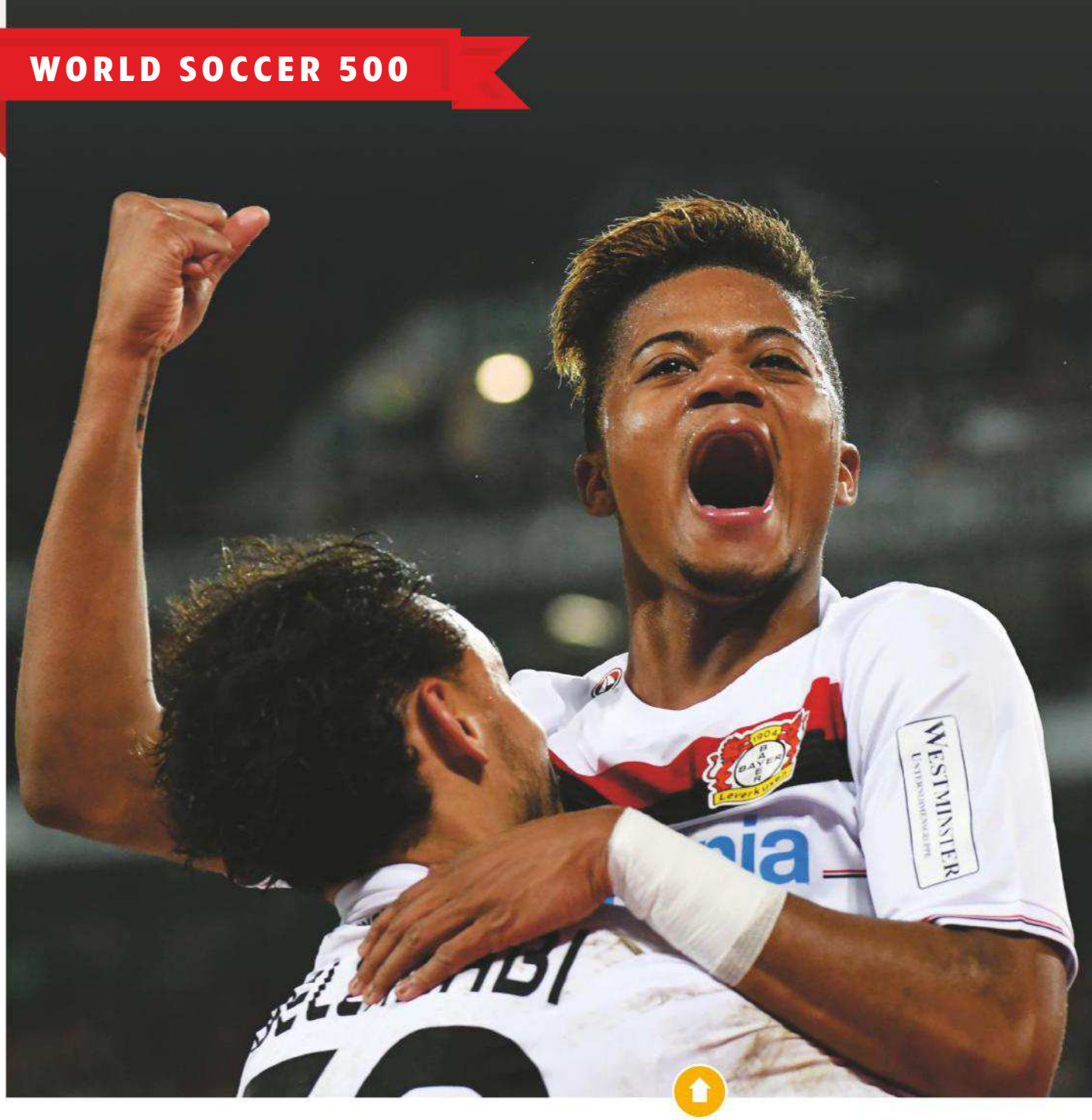
Finland 1
Norway 3
Sweden 4
Iceland 3
Holland 11
Poland 5
Germany 39
Czech Rep 4
Russia 10
Belgium 15
England 11
Denmark 8
Slovakia 2
Romania 3
Serbia 6
Ukraine 3
Bulgaria 1
France 37
Tunisia 1
Portugal 13
Switzerland 9
Greece 2
Turkey 3
Iran 5
Armenia 1
China 1
South Korea 5
Japan 10
Algeria 1
Albania 1
Thailand 1
Austria 5
Bosnia 3
Syria 1
Qatar 1
Slovenia 1
Italy 20
Croatia 10
Israel 2
India 1
Vietnam 1
Ivory Coast 7
Nigeria 4
Egypt 4
Saudi Arabia 1
Philippines 1
Togo 1
Gabon 1
DR Congo 1
Zambia 1
Cameroon 4
Australia 1

WS500 by league

GERMANY's BUNDESLIGA leads the way with 68 players, followed by the ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE



Bundesliga strength...Niklas Sule of Bayern Munich (leftt) fights for the ball with Mark Uth of Hoffenheim



Leon BAILEY

Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) & Jamaica

New Entry Leon Bailey, hear him roar. As far as spectacular football is concerned, Leverkusen's Jamaican winger has the Bundesliga market cornered at the moment.

While there are no end of highly skilled technicians in the German top flight, no one but no one sets the pulses of fans racing like the Kingston-born flyer. Every weekend the 20-year-old stages his own one-man show, a 90-minute cabaret of jet-propelled acceleration, one-on-one tricks and flicks, outrageous goals and audacious assists.

"For me, football is entertainment," he declared on arriving at Leverkusen in January 2017 from Belgian side Genk. "People pay a lot of money to attend a match and I want to give them pleasure, to make them happy. I aim to put on a really good show."

After a slow start to life in Deutschland – essentially spending his first six months at the BayArena as a bit-part performer – he is now the life and soul of the *Werkself* party, the beating heart of their attack.

Shooting to thrill as standard, his area of specialisation this season has been the sensational strike: the nifty back-heeled effort against Hoffenheim; a brilliant solo run and emphatic finish versus Schalke; his pair of arrow-like goals on the counter in a 4-4 draw with Hanover.

As well as effortlessly playing the part of the in-house maverick, Bailey has also been tightening up his all-round game. Excellent in his positional play, he is far less inclined to treat the ball as his personal plaything and is doing his share of pressing duties. "Our coach Heiko Herrlich has taught him how to work without the ball," says the club's director of sport, Rudi Voller.

Bailey has played a friendly for Jamaica's under-23 side but turned down approaches to appear for the senior side. The Football Association and Gareth Southgate are reported to be monitoring the situation.

Leverkusen, who only paid €13.5million for Bailey last year, will most definitely make a handsome profit when they do sell. They have him under contract until 2022 and, as his deal contains no release triggers, any would-be Premier League buyer will have to dig deep, even to the point of coming up with a nine-figure sum.

The Rhinelanders' thinking is clear. If Ousmane Dembele was worth €105m last year, when swapping Dortmund for Barcelona, Bailey should command a similar price tag.

In the end, all will probably depend on where Leverkusen finish in this term's Bundesliga. If they qualify for the Champions League they have every chance of retaining their starlet. If they fail in that mission they may have to cash in. Bailey for England – in more ways than one.

Nick Bidwell

Vincent ABOUBAKAR

Porto (Por) & Cameroon

Cameroon's African Nations Cup hero has re-established himself back in Portugal, scoring regularly after a loan spell at Turkey's Besiktas.

Sebastian ABREU

Audax Italiano (Chl) & Uruguay

New Entry Big, charismatic and intelligent centre-forward who broke the world record this year when he signed for his 26th club (in 11 countries).

Lautaro ACOSTA

Lanus & Argentina

New Entry Rapier-sharp winger, who can play left or right. The key man in his club's run to last year's Libertadores Final, which forced his way into the national squad.

Emmanuel ADEBAYOR

Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) & Togo

New Entry Now 34 and enjoying an Indian summer in Turkey, where his goals have fired his club's surprise title challenge.

Aritz ADURIZ

Athletic Bilbao & Spain

Now 37, the late bloomer continues to defy the odds and ageing process in his third spell at Athletic. Remains a contender for Spain's World Cup squad this summer.

Akram AFIF

Villarreal (Spa) & Qatar

New Entry The most promising of Qatar's home-grown players. At 21, and with some European experience, he is set to form the backbone of the 2022 World Cup side.

Sergio AGUERO

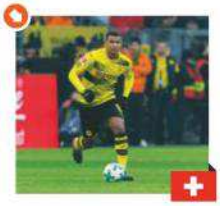
Manchester City (Eng) & Argentina

"*El Kun*" has been in terrific form for City, sparking concerns that the injury-prone 29-year-old might burn out before the summer's World Cup.

Abel AGUILAR

Deportivo Cali & Colombia

New Entry Veteran central midfielder who is back home after an injury-hit 11 years in Europe. Knits the national side together with shrewd and elegant passing.



Manuel AKANJI

Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Switzerland

New Entry Centre-back, aged 22, whose outstanding form for Basle and the Swiss national side earned him a January move to Germany.

Igor AKINFEEV

CSKA Moscow & Russia

New Entry Error-prone Russia captain who made his CSKA debut at 16. Now 31, last year he ended a run of 43 games without a Champions League clean sheet.

Fahad AL MUWALLAD

Al Ittihad & Saudi Arabia

New Entry Exciting talent who is dubbed the "Saudi Messi". Joined Levante in a controversial loan deal in January, but left on the bench.

Omar AL SOMA

Al Ahli (Sau) & Syria

New Entry Returned to play in Syria's final World Cup play-off matches after previously refusing to appear for the national side for political reasons.

David ALABA

Bayern Munich (Ger) & Austria

Only 25, but a hugely influential figure for club and country thanks to his versatility (full-back for Bayern, midfielder for Austria). Also a left-foot free-kick specialist.

Oswaldo ALANIS

Chivas & Mexico

New Entry Left-sided centre-back involved in a contract dispute with Chivas, where his contract expires this summer. A number of European clubs are monitoring events.

Jordi ALBA

Barcelona & Spain

Attacking left-back who has been consistently brilliant for Barca since a move from Valencia in 2012. Scorer of Spain's second goal in the Euro 2012 Final.

Toby ALDERWEIRALD

Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Belgium

A key defensive figure in Spurs' revival under Mauricio Pochettino but recent absences suggest that he could leave this summer.

ALEX SANDRO

Juventus (Ita) & Brazil

New Entry Left-back who is a strong contender for Brazil's World Cup squad. The subject of a reported January 2018 bid from Chelsea, his time in Serie A may be up.

ALISSON

Roma (Ita) & Brazil

New Entry Brazil's number one and, at 25, already the best keeper in Serie A. In outstanding form for Roma, prompting talk of a big-money summer transfer.

Dele ALLI

Tottenham Hotspur & England

Only 22 but a central figure for club and country, having cost Spurs £5m from MK Dons in 2015. Has been criticised for his tendency to play for penalties.

Miguel ALMIRON

Atlanta United (USA) & Paraguay

Playmaker who enjoyed a sensational first season in MLS last year, leading the trend for young Latin stars to move to the USA rather than Europe.

Jozy ALTIDORE

Toronto & USA

Burly centre-forward who has restored his reputation in MLS after a disappointing spell in Europe. Scored the winning goal in the 2017 MLS Final.

Felipe ANDERSON

Lazio (Ita) & Brazil

One of Lazio's most impressive performers over the past few seasons. A row with coach Simone Inzaghi could prompt a summer move for the attacking midfielder.

Franko ANDRIJASEVIC

Gent (Blg) & Croatia

New Entry Goalscoring midfielder who was key in Rijeka's Croatian double last season, earning a move to Belgium as Gent's record signing.

Houssem AOUAR

Lyon & France

New Entry The latest wonderkid to emerge from Lyon's production line. Has played for France under-21s but Algeria are keen to cap the Lyon-born teen at senior level.

Charles ARANGUIZ

Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) & Chile

In improving form for Leverkusen after a difficult, injury-hit start to his Bundesliga career and still a key figure for the Chile national side despite their World Cup qualifying failure.

Nestor ARAUJO

Santos Laguna & Mexico

Central defender who has become an important player for Mexico coach Juan Carlos Osorio. Linked with a move from the Mexican league to Europe this summer.

Billy ARCE

Independiente del Valle & Ecuador

New Entry Latest hot property from a club that specialises in them. Busy little support striker who made a big impression last year.

Juan Carlos ARCE

Bolivar & Bolivia

New Entry Slightly built attacker, originally a winger, but versatile and clever enough to play in midfield. The most decisive player in domestic Bolivian football.

Franco ARMANI

River Plate & Argentina

New Entry Keeper who has moved back home after eight triumphant years in Colombia with Atletico Nacional. Could break into Argentina's World Cup squad.

ARTHUR

Gremio & Brazil

New Entry The new revelation of South American football. The little midfielder has been compared with Andres Iniesta – and Barcelona are set to sign him this summer.

Marco ASENSIO

Real Madrid & Spain

Gifted 22-year-old attacker who is playing an increasingly influential role at the Bernabeu after previous season-long loan spells at Mallorca and Espanyol.

Iago ASPAS

Celta Vigo & Spain

Playing some of the best football of his career at the age of 30 now that he is back at his first club, Celta, after chastening experiences at Liverpool and Sevilla.

Roger ASSALE

Young Boys (Swi) & Ivory Coast

New Entry Ivorian whose goals since moving to Switzerland from TP Mazembe have propelled Young Boys to the brink of the Swiss title, displacing Basle.

Pierre-Emerick AUBAMEYANG

Arsenal (Eng) & Gabon

Arsenal's record £56m signing has yet to catch fire since agitating for a move from Dortmund in January. 2015 African Footballer of the Year.

Sardar AZMOUN

Rubin Kazan (Rus) & Iran

Asia's best striker after his goals carried Iran to the World Cup. Only 23 and linked with a move to western Europe.

Keita BALDE

Monaco (Fra) & Senegal

New Entry Born in Spain, made his mark after PSG signed Kylian Mbappe.

PROFILED
LEON BAILEY
ON PAGE 30

Gareth BALE

Real Madrid (Spa) & Wales

Injuries have again disrupted his season in Madrid, which could be his last in Spain.

PROFILED
CEDRIC BAKAMBU
ON PAGE 33

Leon BALOGUN

Mainz (Ger) & Nigeria

New Entry Centre-back and relative late developer but now established as captain of Nigeria's national side. Born in Germany to a German mother and Nigerian father.

Mario BALOTELLI

Nice (Fra) & Italy

The 27-year-old is never far from the headlines but has found relative stability in the south of France after spells in Milan, Manchester and Liverpool. Could be on the move this summer.

Ezequiel BARCO

Atlanta United (USA) & Argentina

New Entry Teenager who became MLS' record signing when he cost Atalanta $15m. A Sudamericana Cup winner with Independiente.

Wilmar BARRIOS

Boca Juniors (Arg) & Colombia

New Entry International holding midfielder who balances out the Boca side like a prototype Javier Mascherano. Mobile with sound distribution.

Oliver BAUMANN

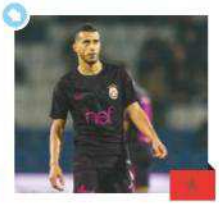
Hoffenheim & Germany

New Entry Former under-21 keeper who is consistently ranked as one of the Bundesliga's top performers. Outstanding for Hoffenheim last year.

Alejandro BEDOYA

Philadelphia Union & USA

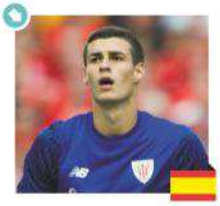
Attacking midfielder of Colombian heritage who made his name in Europe – during spells in Sweden, Scotland and France – before returning to MLS two years ago.



Younes BELHANDA

Galatasaray (Tur) & Morocco

New Entry French-born attacker who has found form in Turkey after spells in Ukraine and Germany. A regular in Morocco's World Cup qualifying campaign.



Kepa ARRIZABALAGA

Athletic Bilbao & Spain

New Entry Recently capped and attracting interest from Real Madrid – hence the €80m buyout clause in his new long-term contract.

Renato AUGUSTO

Beijing Guoan (Chn) & Brazil

Experienced central midfielder who has retained the confidence of Brazil's national coach Tite despite a move to China from Corinthians in 2016.

Maximo BANGUERA

Barcelona & Ecuador

New Entry

Charismatic keeper who has been first choice for nearly a decade at Ecuador's most popular club. Has over 30 caps for his country.

Andrea BELOTTI

Torino & Italy

Striker whose goals last season prompted Torino to place a €100m buyout clause in his contract. Nicknamed *Il Gallo* (The Rooster). Less effective this season.

Cedric BAKAMBU

Beijing Guoan (Chn) & DR Congo

New Entry Normally in China, clubs parade new signings before excited media and fans at the earliest opportunity. But in the case of Cedric Bakambu, the DR Congo forward, a curious case unfolded. Bakambu appeared in pre-season friendlies for Beijing Guoan but the capital club denied any knowledge of having signed him.

Behind these unusual goings-on was a new rule which requires all transfer fees over €5million to be subject to a 100 per cent tax payable to the Chinese FA's youth-development fund. This kept the Chinese transfer window exceptionally quiet when it opened on January 1 as clubs waited to see who would be first to test how much leeway there would be with the new edict. Guoan were first to act with Bakambu.

The 27-year-old French-born forward had a €40m release clause in his contract with Villarreal, whom he joined in 2015 from Turkish club Bursaspor.

Villarreal received the buyout fee in January. But in an effort to dodge the transfer tax, Beijing denied they had paid any monies to the La Liga side, and it was widely reported that Bakambu himself had somehow coughed up the massive fee to be released from his contract.

However, the CFA was not amused by Guoan's explanation and warned clubs of the consequences of "exploiting loopholes".

The affair rumbled on as the Chinese window remained open, and Guoan declined to officially announce the signing of the player. In the end it is understood Guoan had to pay the tax, resulting in a total amount paid of around €74m. The fee makes Bakambu – technically – the most expensive African player of all time.

Adding to the confusion over the rule were Dalian Yiteng, who according to the CFA paid around €5m for Atletico Madrid's Nicolas Gaitan – a player worth several times that amount – to stay below the tax threshold. A similar situation applied to their acquisition of Gaitan's team-mate Yannick Carrasco. Speculation persisted that Dalian Yiteng's new owners – Wanda Group – had snagged the players on the cheap as part of their recent divestment from Atletico Madrid.

The transfer-tax rule has received a mixed response in China. Sponsors were less than impressed by the prospect of fewer big names coming to the league and the Super League's broadcast deal was re-negotiated.

For the moment, Bakambu is as big a name as they will get.

Cameron Wilson

CENGIZ Under

Roma (Ita) & Turkey

New Entry Over the years, not many Turkish footballers have enjoyed significant success in Italian football. Striker Hakan Sukur was useful at Torino, Internazionale and Parma; Umit Davala disappeared at Milan; while the best in the modern Serie A were probably the Inter pair, Emre and Okan, in the early noughties.

That could be about to change because 20-year-old Cengiz Under of Roma at this point looks like not just the best Turkish player seen in Italy for some while, but one of the most exciting new arrivals in Serie A this season.

Bought from Istanbul Basaksehir for around €15million last summer, it is safe to say that when Cengiz arrived in Rome, few of his new fans had the faintest idea as to how good he actually was. Those who consulted his track record, however, would have been glad to note that he had been a key element in a Turkish Super Lig season which had seen his side finish second to city rivals Besiktas.

After a typically quiet settling-in period in the autumn – when he was learning to cope with a new city, new language and new team – he exploded onto the scene in February this year, scoring five Serie A goals (against Verona, Benevento, Udinese and Napoli) as well as one against Shakhtar Donetsk in the Champions League. These goals were all the more important since they came at a crisis moment when Roma seemed to have temporarily lost their way, dropping to fifth in the league. To some extent, he appeared to have single-handedly put them back on the rails.

When Roma's new transfer boss, Spanish sports director Monchi, bought Cengiz last summer, ostensibly to replace Mohamed Salah, not many would have dared suggest that the new boy would be good enough to step into Salah's lightning fast shoes. To the surprise and delight of Roma fans, he has thus far exceeded all expectations.

Serious about his football, Cengiz is so quiet off the field that just about the only place he ever goes in his non-training, non-playing hours is to visit his barber. But those who know the player say that he is utterly aware that Roma represents an important opportunity and one that he is not going to blow.

His coach, Eusebio Di Francesco, has no doubts about the quality of the left-footed attacking midfielder who likes to play on the right flank, stepping inside to use his more powerful foot. Di Francesco has likened him to former Roma great Vincenzo Montella for his "lightning strikes" and also for the manner in which he "hides his intentions from the defender".

Already capped six times for Turkey, Cengiz seems to be right at the start of an important career which seems destined to be played out at some of the most important clubs in Europe.

Paddy Agnew

Wissam BEN YEDDER

Sevilla (Spa) & France

A regular scorer for Sevilla, the former France under-21 has turned down Tunisia's overtures in the hope of a senior French call-up.

Mehdi BENATIA

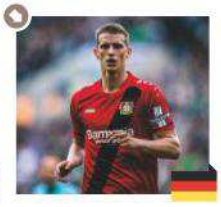
Juventus (Ita) & Morocco

New Entry Experienced centre-back who is Morocco's most high-profile player after replacing Leonardo Bonucci in Juventus' starting line-up.

Cristian BENAVENTE

Charleroi (Blg) & Peru

New Entry Rejected by MK Dons and once dubbed the Peruvian Ronaldinho, the attacking midfielder has been a revelation in Belgium.



Lars BENDER

Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

New Entry Struggled with injury since missing the 2014 World Cup but has recovered his form this season. The twin brother of Leverkusen team-mate Sven.

Rodrigo BENTANCUR

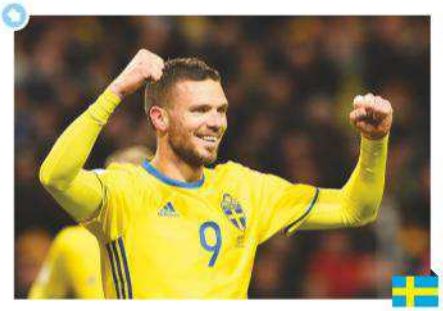
Juventus (Ita) & Uruguay

New Entry Dynamic, versatile midfielder who represents a new generation of talent emerging in the Uruguayan national side.

Karim BENZEMA

Real Madrid (Spa) & France

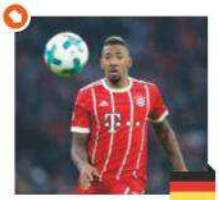
Facing an uncertain future in Madrid despite signing a four-year contract last year. Missed Euro 2016 because of his alleged involvement in a blackmail case.



Marcus BERG

Al Ain (UAE) & Sweden

Still a key figure for a post-Zlatan Swedish team, despite now playing in UAE after a summer switch from the Greek league. Sweden's top scorer in World Cup qualifying.



Jerome BOATENG

Bayern Munich & Germany

Commanding and cultured World Cup-winning centre-back who is back in form after a period of injury. Half-brother of Kevin-Prince Boateng.

Leonardo BONUCCI

Milan & Italy

One of the world's leading defenders, he made a shock switch from Juventus to Milan last summer, but took some time to settle in what was an underperforming side.

Miguel BORJA

Palmeiras (Bra) & Colombia

Powerful centre-forward who had a brief but highly successful spell, winning the 2016 Libertadores, with Atletico Nacional. In Brazil since 2017.

Sofiane BOUFAL

Southampton (Eng) & Morocco

New Entry The 24-year-old attacker has yet to reproduce his Lille form in England, but he remains an important attacking figure for the national side.

Mbark BOUSSOUFA

Al Jazira (UAE) & Morocco

New Entry Much travelled Dutch-born attacker who has played in Belgium and Russia. He will provide Morocco's creative spark at the World Cup.

Filip BRADARIC

Rijeka & Croatia

New Entry Central midfielder who was a Croatian league and cup double winner last season and is set for a move abroad this summer.

Michael BRADLEY

Toronto & USA

Experienced national team midfielder who finally claimed the MLS title with Toronto in December. The son of Los Angeles and former USA coach Bob Bradley.

Yacine BRAHIMI

Porto (Por) & Algeria

Exciting winger who has remained in Portugal, thanks to the €60m buyout clause Porto inserted in his contract to extract a hefty fee from Premier League clubs.

Julian BRANDT

Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

One of the great hopes of German football, the wide attacker could leave Leverkusen this summer after continued excellent Bundesliga form.

Constantin BUDESCU

Steaua & Romania

New Entry Voted Romania's player of the year in 2017 for strong performances back home after an ill-fated move to the Chinese second tier.

Gigi BUFFON

Juventus & Italy

The 40-year-old continues to hog headlines as his retirement looms. Says he might quit this summer unless Juve win the Champions League.

Diego BUONANOTTE

Universidad Catolica (Chl) & Argentina

New Entry Impish little playmaker who made his name with River Plate. After spells in Spain and Greece he has been in Chile since 2016, playing some of the finest football of his career.

BURAK Yilmaz

Trabzonspor & Turkey

New Entry Veteran striker who is starring back in the Turkish league after an unsuccessful spell in China. Has now played for all of Turkey's top clubs.

Sergio BUSQUETS

Barcelona & Spain

The 29-year-old remains one of the world's best midfielders, highly valued by his more decorated team-mates. Son of former Barca keeper Carles.

Bohdan BUTKO

Shakhtar Donetsk & Ukraine

New Entry Right-back who was a key figure in Shakhtar's double win last season and is also established as a regular with the Ukrainian national side.

Mattia CALDARA

Juventus & Italy

New Entry Highly rated centre-back, seen as a future national-team stalwart. Back at Atalanta on loan from Juventus, who paid €15m for him last year.

Daniel CALIGIURI

Schalke & Germany

New Entry Right-sided midfielder who has been an impressive performer in Schalke's exciting Bundesliga campaign this season. Joined from Wolfsburg last summer.

Jose CALLEJON

Napoli (Ita) & Spain

Former Real Madrid trainee who has re-invented himself in Italy, thriving in Napoli's title challenge and enjoying a more attacking role under coach Maurizio Sarri.

Nestor CAMACHO

Olimpia & Paraguay

After spells in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and three Paraguayan clubs, last year this versatile attacker finally arrived at one of his country's big two clubs.

Martin CAMPANA

Independiente (Arg) & Uruguay

New Entry Uruguay's third-choice keeper, and one of the best in Argentinian football, where he has been based since 2016. Not the biggest, but is calm and reliable.

Antonio CANDREVA

Internazionale & Italy

Versatile right-sided midfielder who has struggled this season and could be on his way out at Inter. His agent has claimed he almost joined Chelsea last year.

Oscar CARDOZO

Libertad & Paraguay

New Entry Big, left-footed centre-forward who returned home last year after more than a decade abroad. Almost all of Paraguay's 2010 World Cup quarter-finalists are now back home.

Dani CARVAJAL

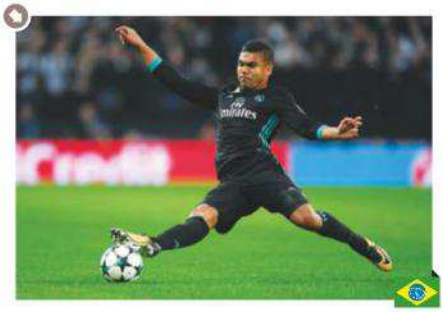
Real Madrid & Spain

Right-back who has thrived in his second spell at the Bernabeu after a season in Germany with Bayer Leverkusen transformed his career.

William CARVALHO

Sporting & Portugal

Powerful, dynamic central midfielder who was a Euro 2016 winner. Now 26, he has remained in Portugal despite numerous bids from England and China.



CASEMIRO

Real Madrid (Spa) & Brazil

Defensive midfielder who has emerged as a central figure at Zinedine Zidane's Real Madrid. Already assured of his place in Brazil's World Cup squad.

CASSIO

Corinthians & Brazil

New Entry Giant keeper who was the hero of Corinthians' 2012 Club World Cup win. Is now in contention to be Brazil's third-choice World Cup keeper.

Nicolas CASTILLO

Pumas (Mex) & Chile

Striker who has been a goalscoring revelation at Pumas since a return from an ill-fated move to Belgium and Club Brugge. A return to Europe beckons.

Lucas CAVALLINI

Penarol (Uru) & Canada

Toronto-born striker who made his name in Uruguay and is now on loan to Mexico's Puebla. Capped by Canada at 19, he recently returned to the national squad.

Edinson CAVANI

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Uruguay

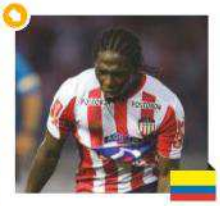
Filled the void left at PSG by Zlatan and has thrived despite reported rows with Neymar.

Franco CERVI

Benfica (Por) & Argentina

New Entry The latest Argentinian to enjoy success at Benfica, having started his career at Rosario Central.

PROFILED CENGIZ UNDER ON PAGE 34



Yimmi CHARA

Junior & Colombia

New Entry Stocky, rapid attacking midfielder, normally used in wide positions, who has been playing the best football of his career since returning from Mexico last year.

Sunil CHHETRI

Bengaluru & India

New Entry India's record goalscorer and most capped player. Has played in the Indian Super League for Mumbai City and then in the I-League for Bengaluru.

Giorgio CHIELLINI

Juventus & Italy

Fierce left-sided centre-back who at 34 is approaching the end of his career but still manages to pull out top-level performances when it matters most.

Pontus DAHLBERG

Watford (Eng) & Sweden

New Entry That the highly rated 19-year-old keeper has pledged to join Premier League side Watford next season should not come as a particular surprise.

Watford's owners, the Italian Pozzo family, have always been early-bird talent spotters and the youngster is a typical example of one of their acquisitions: full of fledgling promise, ambitious yet grounded, and relatively inexpensive, having cost around £3million.

Reported to have been on the wish-list of such big-name outfits as Arsenal, Tottenham Hotspur, Paris Saint-Germain, Napoli, Bayer Leverkusen and Schalke, he could have chosen a far more prestigious destination than Vicarage Road, but sensibly refused to play the glamour game. "I've never striven for the money," says Dahlberg. "That's not the priority.

"What's crucial is my career development and Watford have a clear plan for me."

Last season was his first as a professional and he was in fine form for IFK Gothenburg, deservedly receiving a double helping of recognition at the 2017 Allsvenskan awards gala. Not only was he shortlisted in the Goalkeeper of the Year category, in which he came third, he also walked away with the leading rookie prize.

From the town of Alvangen, some 19 miles north of Gothenburg, he is already a full international, making his debut for the *Blagult* in January's friendly against Estonia in Abu Dhabi, and is very much in contention for a back-up spot at this summer's World Cup. With Sweden's third-choice keeper Kristoffer Nordfeldt desperately short of match practice at Swansea City, the teen could well find himself on the plane to Russia.

"There's a lot of competition for the goalkeeping berths in the Swedish squad. We've many good keepers," says Dahlberg.

"However, the World Cup is a really exciting incentive. Obviously, you dream of taking part in such tournaments."

Prowling his box with intensity and focus, he cuts an impressive figure. Tall and commanding, he is agile, athletic and brave, quick off his line, and sharp in his reflexes. In terms of his personality, he is ideal for the last-line-of-defence role. Assertive and extremely self-confident despite his tender years, he is a natural back-line organiser.

Nor is he one to be intimidated physically. He was infamously involved in a heated exchange of views last season with Hacken's Mathias Ranegie, when convinced his opponent had deliberately set out to injure him in a challenge.

"He's a cocky young brat," retorted the striker after the game.

Don't expect him to take a backward step.

Nick Bidwell

Federico CHIESA

Fiorerentina & Italy

New Entry The 20-year-old son of former Italy star Enrico Chiesa, he has burst onto the Serie A scene in the past 18 months with a series of skilful displays.

Andreas CHRISTENSEN

Chelsea (Eng) & Denmark

New Entry Centre-back and a rarity: a Chelsea loanee (two seasons at Gladbach) who has succeeded on his return to the club.

Kingsley COMAN

Bayern Munich (Ger) & France

New Entry Young winger, just 21, who has been in sparkling form this season but suffered an ankle injury in February that puts his World Cup place in doubt.

Andrea CONTI

Milan & Italy

New Entry Wing-back who broke into the national side after starring for Atalanta last season and earning a move to Milan, where injury has restricted his impact.

Jesus CORONA

Porto (Por) & Mexico

At 25, he has been one of Mexican football's most successful exports to Europe, starring in Porto's Portuguese title challenge this season.

Diego COSTA

Atletico Madrid & Spain

Bustling, boisterous centre-forward who is back in Spain after a spectacular fallout with Chelsea coach Antonio Conte. In contention for a Spain recall.

Ayrton COUGO

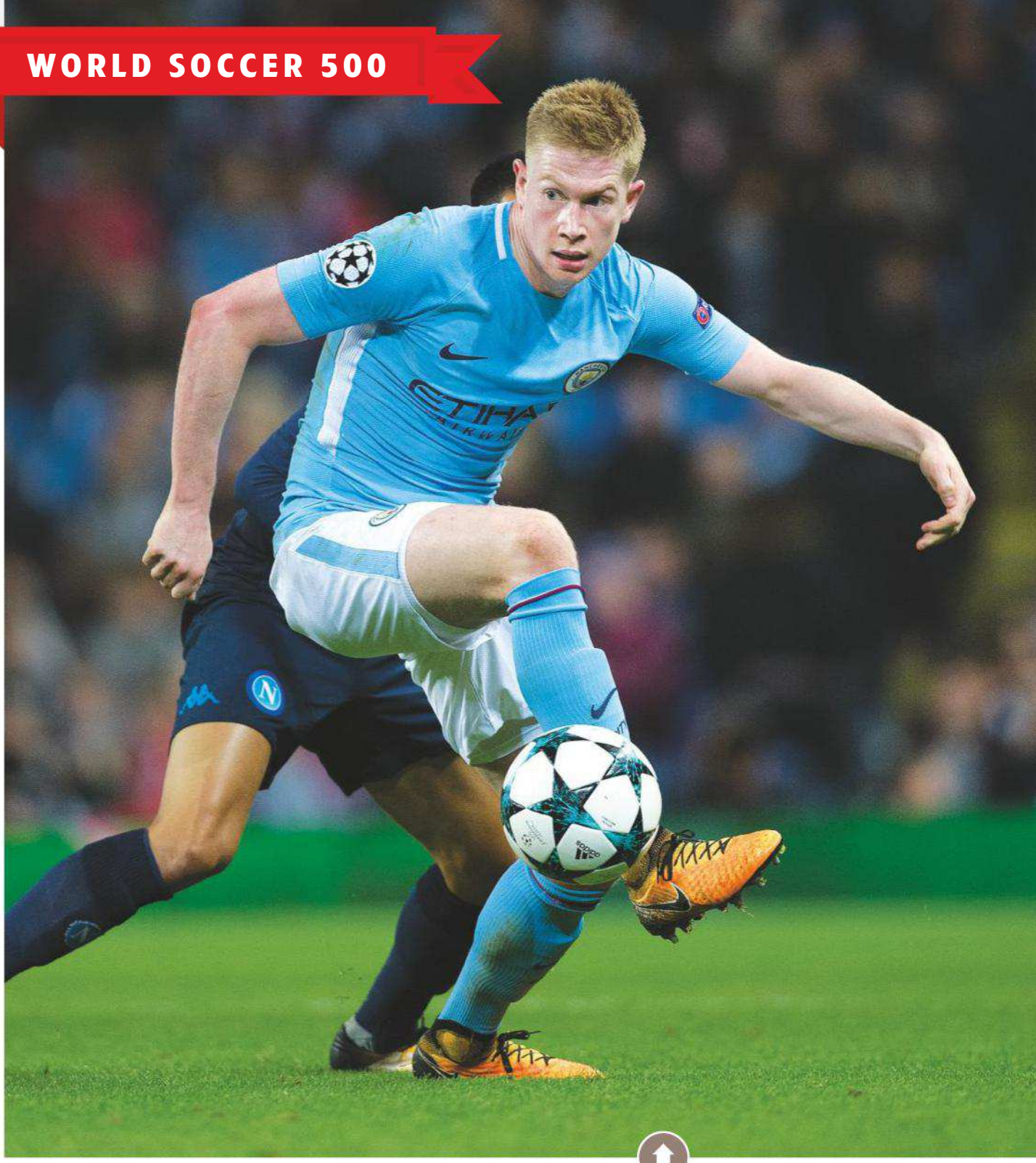
Defensor & Uruguay

New Entry Strong running left-footer, capable of filling any position down the flank. Has become an important player in a club that specialises in youth development.

Thibaut COURTOIS

Chelsea (Eng) & Belgium

Enjoying a fourth season at Stamford Bridge but there are strong suggestions it could be his last, with Real Madrid and others monitoring his situation.



Kevin DE BRUYNE

Manchester City (Eng) & Belgium

Liverpool supporters may loudly put the case for Mohamed Salah, but the outstanding player of the Premier League season so far has surely been the stand-out player in an outstanding Manchester City side that has left all comers trailing in their wake.

By the end of February, De Bruyne had the most assists in the Premier League with 14, four ahead of his City team-mate Leroy Sane. He has excelled as one of two playmakers, the other being David Silva, in a Pep Guardiola side that has delighted City fans and thrilled neutrals in equal measure, and turned the title race into a one-team coronation.

The Belgian's dazzling form prompted City to extend his contract until 2023, with Guardiola eulogising: "Kevin is one of the best players I have ever seen in my life, in terms of how he can make absolutely everything.

"He is a top, top quality player. We are so proud and so happy he is with us."

Off the pitch, De Bruyne has found greater stability, following marriage to girlfriend Michele Lacroix, mother of his two-year-old son Mason.

"He's a stable guy, so professional, he loves to play football, lives for that and is focused on that," adds Guardiola. "Maybe last year he had a little bit up and down, maybe because we didn't win too many games when we deserved to.

"But this season, since the beginning, in pre-season, not just in the States, and in Manchester, he is so stable."

City's dominance of domestic affairs has allowed talk of a serious Champions League challenge to flourish and it would be no surprise if De Bruyne assists City on their way to a Final appearance in Kiev on May 26.

Thoughts have also turned to the summer's World Cup, where Belgium face England in their group match in Kaliningrad. The English will need no reminding of De Bruyne's abilities.

John Holmesdale

Philippe COUTINHO

Barcelona (Spa) & Brazil

The world's second most expensive footballer, signed for £146m from Liverpool and viewed by Barca as a long-term replacement for Andres Iniesta.

Christian CUEVA

Sao Paulo (Bra) & Peru

Talented but wayward little playmaker, a key player for club and country. But is he sufficiently reliable when the pressure is on? This year should provide the answer.

Patrick CUTRONE

Milan & Italy

Home-grown 20-year old who was promoted to the first team last year and has been prolific in front of goal this season. Strong, good in the air and set for a national call-up.

Munas DABBUR

Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) & Israel

Israeli striker who has enjoyed a much improved season in Austria after last year's loan back at Grasshoppers.

Teerasil DANGDA

Muangthong United & Thailand

New Entry Thailand's leading player, he recently moved on loan to Japanese club Sanfrecce.

PROFILED **Pontus DAHLBERG** ON PAGE 37

DANILO Barbosa

Braga (Por) & Brazil

New Entry Defensive midfielder who is back at Braga and thriving after loans at Valencia, Benfica and Standard Liege. Has played for Brazil at all levels except the seniors.

DANILO Pereira

Porto & Portugal

Defensive midfielder who is tipped to be the next big sale from Porto, with a number of Premier League clubs interested. A Euro 2016 winner with Portugal.

Giorgian DE ARRASCAETA

Cruzeiro (Bra) & Uruguay

Talented attacking midfielder or second striker who faces a big year for club and country.

David DE GEA

Manchester United (Eng) & Spain

Probably United's best player this season but his contract expires next year.

PROFILED **Kevin DE BRUYNE** ON PAGE 38

Frenkie DE JONG

Ajax & Holland

New Entry Versatile 20-year-old who is currently generating a lot of excitement in Amsterdam, though he came from Willem II and not through the Ajax academy.

Luuk DE JONG

PSV & Holland

New Entry Striker who has recovered his career in Eindhoven after disappointing spells at Gladbach and Newcastle. He is the younger brother of Siem De Jong.

Matthijs DE LIGT

Ajax & Holland

New Entry Highly rated teenage centre-back who made his senior Holland debut after just two senior games for Ajax. Contracted until 2021.

Stefan DE VRIJ

Lazio (Ita) & Holland

New Entry Ball-playing centre-back who is reported to be set to join Internazionale on a free transfer this summer after four seasons at Lazio.

Thomas DELANEY

Werder Bremen (Ger) & Denmark

Midfield all-rounder, a ball-winner and goalscorer who has been highly effective for Bremen since a 2017 move. Important for Denmark, too.

Mousa DEMBELE

Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Belgium

Central midfielder who has become one of the most important figures for Mauricio Pochettino's Spurs side. Also a key man for Belgium.

Ousmane DEMBELE

Barcelona (Spa) & France

Youngster who cost Barcelona £135m from Dortmund last summer, having played just one season in the Bundesliga. Injuries have affected his impact in Spain.

Clint DEMPSEY

Seattle Sounders & USA

Veteran striker who, at the age of 34, continues to star for MLS side Seattle. Currently level with Landon Donovan as the USA's all-time top scorer on 57 goals.

Leander DENDONCKER

Anderlecht & Belgium

Versatile midfielder who looks set to leave Anderlecht this summer, with a number of Premier League clubs watching him.

Memphis DEPAY

Lyon (Fra) & Holland

Dutch attacker playing the best football of his career in France after a disappointing spell at Manchester United, where he wore the famous number seven shirt.

Angel DI MARIA

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Argentina

The ex-Real Madrid winger could have felt frustrated this season, marginalised by Neymar. But his form since the new year has been impressive.

Abdou DIALLO

Mainz (Ger) & France

New Entry France's under-21 captain has impressed many in his first season in the Bundesliga following a move from Monaco, where he found opportunities limited.

Mariano DIAZ

Lyon (Fra) & Dominican Republic

New Entry Spanish-born striker who has filled the gap left by Alexandre Lacazette. A fringe player at Real Madrid before an €8m move to Lyon.

Serey DIE

Basle (Swi) & Ivory Coast

New Entry Veteran defensive midfielder who is enjoying life back at Basle after suffering relegation from the Bundesliga in 2016 during his time with Stuttgart.

Eric DIER

Tottenham Hotspur & England

Midfield holder who is just as happy as a centre-back. Raised in Portugal at Sporting's academy in Lisbon after his mum moved there to work at the Euros in 2004.

Kasper DOLBERG

Ajax (Hol) & Denmark

The 20-year-old shot to fame last season when Ajax reached the Europa League Final. Suffered a foot injury in January but is expected to be fit for Denmark's World Cup campaign.

Gianluigi DONNARUMMA

Milan & Italy

Still only 19 but already a regular for Milan and seen as the long-term successor to Gianluigi Buffon in the Italian national side.

Giovani DOS SANTOS

LA Galaxy (USA) & Mexico

Now 28, the former Barcelona and Spurs attacker already has more than 100 caps for the Mexican national side. In his fourth season in MLS.

Jonathan DOS SANTOS

LA Galaxy (USA) & Mexico

Re-united with elder brother Giovani last summer after three seasons at Villarreal. His Brazilian father Zizinho played in Mexico in the 1980s.

Bas DOST

Sporting (Por) & Holland

One of Europe's most effective goalscorers, averaging more than a goal a game in Portugal. Previously with Wolfsburg, where he earned international recognition for Holland.

Paulo DYBALA

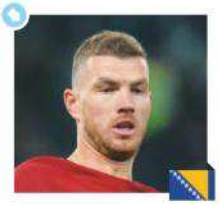
Juventus (Ita) & Argentina

The jewel in the Juve crown who has been outstanding since moving to Turin from Palermo in 2015. But not guaranteed a place in Argentina's World Cup squad.

Alan DZAGOEV

CSKA Moscow & Russia

Russia's leading midfielder but troubled by injuries. Now 27, he made his international debut at 18, beginning as an attacking midfielder before switching to a more defensive role.



Edin DZEKO

Roma (Ita) & Bosnia

New Entry Striker who has re-found his scoring touch in Serie A. His goals fired Wolfsburg to the 2009 Bundesliga title and Bosnia to the 2010 World Cup.

Georgi DZHIKIYA

Spartak Moscow & Russia

New Entry A key figure in Amkar Perm's rise, earning a Russia call-up and January 2017 transfer to Spartak. A knee injury has placed his World Cup place in doubt.

EDERSON

Manchester City (Eng) & Brazil

Signed by City from Benfica for £35m last summer for his "sweeper-keeper" ball-playing qualities. Made his senior Brazil debut in October 2017.

Essam EL HADARY

Al Taawoun (Sau) & Egypt

New Entry Veteran who, aged 45, will become the World Cup's oldest player if he makes Egypt's squad this summer. Four-times Nations Cup winner.

Ayoub EL KAABI

RS Berkane & Morocco

New Entry The undisputed star of the recent African Nations Championship, the tournament for homegrown players, scoring nine goals for the victorious hosts.

Stephan EL SHAARAWY

Roma & Italy

New Entry Exciting attacker whose form for Roma earned him an Italy recall this season. Born in Italy to an Egyptian father and Italian mother.

Mohamed ELYOUNOUSSI

Basle (Swi) & Norway

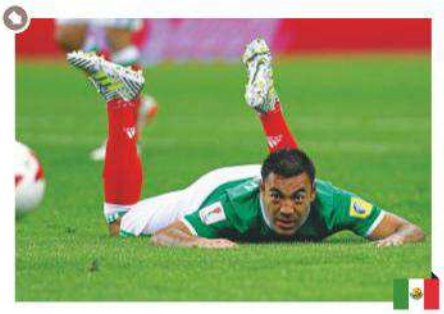
New Entry

Moroccan-born winger who moved to Norway as a teenager and has since thrived at Basle, earning comparisons with Mohamed Salah.

Christian ERIKSEN

Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Denmark

The best Danish player of his generation, his goals took Denmark to the 2018 World Cup, while Spurs have benefitted from a range of skills since his £11m transfer from Ajax in 2013.



Marco FABIAN

Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) & Mexico

A 2012 Olympic gold medallist and hugely popular figure in Mexican football. Missed the first half of this season's Bundesliga campaign with a back injury.

FABINHO

Monaco (Fra) & Brazil

One of the heroes of Monaco's Ligue 1 success last season. Can play at right-back or defensive midfield. Tipped to leave the club at the end of this season.

Radamel FALCAO

Monaco (Fra) & Colombia

Powerful, prolific goalscorer who has re-found his scoring form in France. Missed much of Colombia's World Cup qualifying campaign through injury.

Jefferson FARFAN

Lokomotiv Moscow (Rus) & Peru

New Entry The 33-year-old winger has enjoyed a revival in Russia after a move to UAE's Al Jazira turned sour. Back in the Peru squad.

Wuilker FARINEZ

Millonarios (Col) & Venezuela

New Entry Precocious keeper, on the short side but wonderfully agile and able to take sound decisions. Recently swapped Caracas for the Colombian champions.

Julian DRAXLER

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Germany

A 2014 World Cup winner with Germany, the 24-year-old's future at PSG has been questioned following the arrival of Neymar and Mbappe.

Karim EL AHMADI

Feyenood (Hol) & Morocco

Midfield lynchpin who helped Feyenoord to their first league title for 16 years and was also a regular for Morocco in their successful World Cup campaign.

Saeid EZATOLAHI

Rostov (Rus) & Iran

New Entry Hailed as the "Persian Pogba" after strong performances in the Russian league. Only 21 but already a regular for the Iranian national side.

Ahmed FATHY

Al Ahly & Egypt

New Entry Defensive stalwart of the Egypt national side since 2002, winning 120 caps and now preparing to take part in his first World Cup finals.

Bruno FERNANDES

Sporting & Portugal

New Entry When a whopping €100million release clause was put in the former Portugal under-21 captain's contract last summer, most saw it as a sign of the megalomaniac tendencies of Sporting president Bruno De Carvalho. Nine months later, his current value is possibly nearer that eye-watering figure than the bargain €8.5m fee that they paid Sampdoria for him.

"When we decided to buy Fernandes, we felt he had something different from the usual," says Sporting coach Jorge Jesus. "He's still got a lot to learn, but he's making the most of his talent."

Usually at the heart of the action in central midfield, he has been equally adept when pushed further up the pitch behind striker Bas Dost or stationed wide right.

And despite a number of goal-of-the-season contenders, bursting the net with a series of right-foot thunderbolts from distance, just as impressive are his indefatigable energy levels. Only goalkeeper Rui Patricio and centre-back Sebastian Coates have played more minutes as Sporting fight for silverware on four fronts.

Born in Maia on the outskirts of Porto, the Boavista youth player joined Italian lower-league side Novara Calcio at 17. Subsequent moves to Udinese and Sampdoria followed, before returning home with 119 Serie A appearances on his CV despite being only 22.

The emergence of a generation of gifted Portuguese midfielders has threatened to block his path to the senior national side. But should he continue to improve it would be foolish to put a ceiling on his potential, not least given the level-headed attitude evident in interviews.

"I was compared to Rui Costa when I was at Novara; then after moving to Udinese, when we played Fiorentina, the connection was made again," he told Portuguese website Maisfutebol. "To be honest, I think it's a lack of respect.

"I've done very little to be compared to him. He was a player who I admired immensely. I just have to keep working hard so that in future years a young player can appear and say he wants to be like me."

Keep up the current rate of progress and that day won't be far away.

Tom Kundert

Alireza JAHANBAKHSH

AZ (Hol) & Iran

New Entry "I want to become Iran's Johan Cruyff," said the winger on his arrival in Holland in 2013. And while it remains to be seen if he will surpass Iranian legends such as Ali Daei, Ali Karimi and his idol Mehdi Mahdavikia, he is certainly having the best season of his career.

A vital cog in AZ's fine domestic campaign, no player in the Eredivisie had more shots on target or ball possession in the box by the end of February. But what really makes him tick are his crosses and goals. No other winger in the Eredivisie has delivered more, and by the start of March he had eight assists and 11 goals.

All of his success so far has been the result of a well-planned career. From the north-west town of Jirandeh, he started at the youth academy of Damash in Teheran at the age of 13. Then, after helping Damash Karaj gain promotion to the second tier in 2011, he moved to Damash SC, who had just returned to the top flight.

He didn't stay long, however, as Europe was the ultimate goal and Nijmegen his destination. There wasn't instant success at NEC as they were relegated in his first season. He had done well enough to attract the interest of several other Dutch clubs, but rather than move on he opted to stay, and his 12 goals and 17 assists helped the club return to the Eredivisie and saw him crowned the Eerste Divisie's player of the season.

Despite interest from Brighton & Hove Albion, he decided to stay in Holland and joined AZ where, after shaking off a couple of injuries, he is finally making his mark.

A down-to-earth character off the pitch, he found himself at the centre of a political storm last season when his Dutch club side were drawn against Maccabi Tel Aviv in the Europa League. With Iran refusing to recognise Israel, playing in Tel Aviv would have seriously jeopardised his chances in the national team so AZ decided not to select him for the game.

Bought for €1.8million, his value is now north of €8m, and since he has a contract with AZ until 2020 they will be in the driver's seat should any transfer enquiries arrive this summer.

The most likely destination for any move would be the Bundesliga, following the same path as his famous compatriots. "It's because of Daei, Karimi and Vahid Hashemian at Bayern Munich that I started playing football," he says. "The Bundesliga is my favourite league."

And perhaps the best route for him if he is to become Iran's all-time best.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

Nabil FEKIR

Lyon & France

New Entry Gifted 24-year-old attacker who has recovered from a knee injury in 2015 to become Lyon captain.

FERNANDINHO

Manchester City (Eng) & Brazil

City's midfield lynchpin. Part of the Brazil team humiliated at the 2014 World Cup but is still part of the squad.

PROFILED **BRUNO FERNANDES** ON PAGE 41

FILIPE LUIS

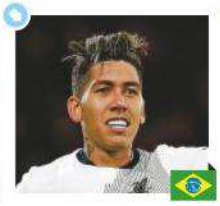
Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Brazil

Left-back who found life difficult during his season at Chelsea but has since returned to Madrid to play a crucial role for Diego Simeone's Atletico side.

Alfred FINNBOGASON

Augsburg (Ger) & Iceland

New Entry Much travelled front man, a regular scorer in the Bundesliga and now established as Iceland's first-choice striker.



Roberto FIRMINO

Liverpool (Eng) & Brazil

Quick-witted striker who is thriving under Jurgen Klopp at Liverpool and will likely travel to this summer's World Cup as one of Brazil's reserve forwards.

Edison FLORES

AaB (Den) & Peru

New Entry Young winger (23), the revelation of Peru's World Cup campaign, scoring five goals and prompting calls for him to move up from the Danish league.

Phil FODEN

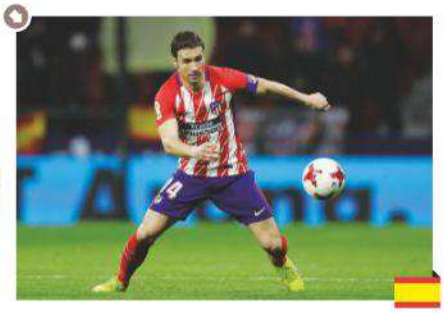
Manchester City & England

New Entry The star of England's under-17 world title victory last year. Dubbed the "Stockport Iniesta", he is already earning first-team call-ups from Pep Guardiola.

Emil FORSBERG

RB Leipzig (Ger) & Sweden

One of the Bundesliga's best attacking midfielders who has driven Leipzig to the league's top two. Also established as Sweden's main creative force.



GABI

Atletico Madrid & Spain

Long-time captain of Atletico, now in his 12th season (over two spells) with the club. Played for Spain under-21s but remarkably not capped at senior level.

GABRIEL Barbosa

Internazionale (Ita) & Brazil

Quick, skilful striker who is back in Brazil on loan at Santos having failed to make an impression in Europe – mostly due to a lack of maturity than of talent.

Jesus GALLARDO

Pumas & Mexico

New Entry Left-winger whose versatility and form this year for Pumas in the Mexican league could earn him a place in his country's World Cup squad.

Jean-Philippe GBAMIN

Mainz (Ger) & Ivory Coast

New Entry Athletic midfielder who has adapted well to life in Germany. Played for France's youth teams but made his senior debut for Ivory Coast.

Dennis GEIGER

Hoffenheim & Germany

New Entry Teenager, capped by Germany at under-19 level, who is thriving in his first Bundesliga campaign. Recently extended his contract until 2022.

Pedro GEROMEL

Gremio & Brazil

New Entry Centre-back who has had a varied career. Both lauded and rejected in Germany, struggled in Spain but now seen by Gremio fans as a sure bet for the World Cup.

Andre-Pierre GIGNAC

Tigres (Mex) & France

Enjoying his life in Mexico, helping Tigres to the Liga MX title in his third season. Now 32, an outside contender for France's World Cup squad.

Jose GIMENEZ

Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Uruguay

Highly rated centre-back who is part of a new generation in the Uruguayan national side. Recently agreed a new Atletico contract until 2020.

Sebastian GIOVINCO

Toronto (USA) & Italy

One of the most successful European exports to MLS, the "Atomic Ant" helped Toronto win their first league title in December.

Olivier GIROUD

Chelsea (Eng) & France

Clever and strong target man with one of the best strike-rates in the Premier League. Fell out of favour at Arsenal and moved to Stamford Bridge in January.

Kamil GLIK

Monaco (Fra) & Poland

Tough central defender who endured a difficult upbringing in Poland to become a stalwart of his country's successful World Cup qualifying campaign.

Denis GLUSHAKOV

Spartak Moscow & Russia

Defensive midfielder who will be a key figure in the Russian national team when they host the World Cup. A Russian league winner with Spartak last season.

Diego GODIN

Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Uruguay

One of the world's best centre-backs. At 32, he is not as quick as he was, but his leadership and set-piece goals make him an essential selection.

Aleksandr GOLOVIN

CSKA Moscow & Russia

New Entry Considered the brightest young talent in Russian football and one of the few bright spots for Russia in a disappointing Confederations Cup last summer.

Alejandro GOMEZ

Atalanta (Ita) & Argentina

One of the stars of Atalanta's rise up Serie A in recent seasons. The 30-year-old Italo-Argentine extended his contract last summer despite much transfer interest.

Bafetimbi GOMIS

Galatasaray (Tur) & France

New Entry After two disappointing seasons at Swansea, the 32-year-old revived his career at Marseille last season and now Turkey, where he was the league top scorer at the start of March.

Jonathan GONZALEZ

Monterrey & Mexico

New Entry US-born midfielder, already a starter for Monterrey at 18. Opted to play for Mexico, sparking a debate about US youth development.

Leon GORETZKA

Schalke & Germany

One of the rising stars of German football after some impressive performances at last summer's Confederations Cup. Set to join Bayern Munich this summer.

Mario GOTZE

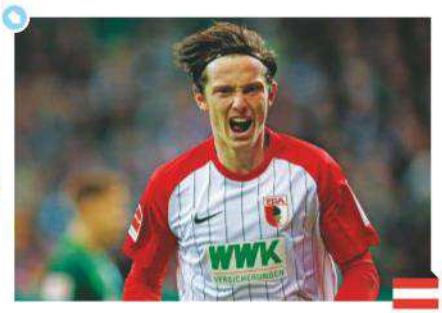
Borussia Dortmund & Germany

New Entry In his second spell at Dortmund, Germany's 2014 World Cup Final hero is getting back to his best form after a run of injuries and illnesses.

Andreas GRANQVIST

Krasnodar (Rus) & Sweden

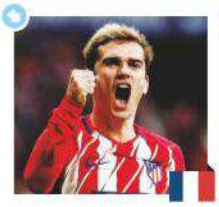
New Entry Captain of club and country. Played a vital role in the rearguard action that saw Sweden hold off Italy in the World Cup qualifying play-off.



Michael GREGORITSCH

Augsburg (Ger) & Austria

New Entry Versatile 23-year-old who is on a rich run of form since joining Augsburg last summer from Hamburg, scoring 11 goals by early March – his best ever in a Bundesliga campaign.



Antoine GRIEZMANN

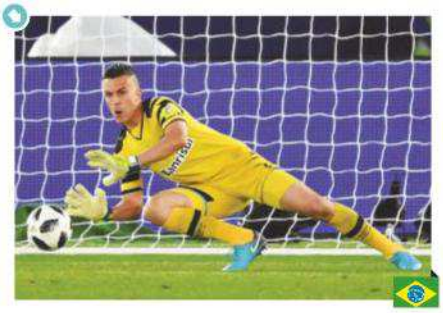
Atletico Madrid (Spa) & France

Despite signing a new deal with Atletico last summer, speculation persists that he has a pre-contract to join Barcelona next season.

Alex GRIMALDO

Benfica (Por) & Spain

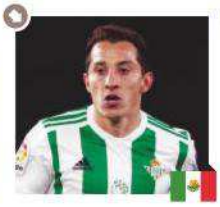
New Entry Highly regarded left-back who left Barcelona B to join Benfica in 2016 in a bid for first-team football. Reportedly a target for a number of Europe's top clubs.



Marcelo GROHE

Gremio & Brazil

New Entry One of Gremio's heroes in their recent successful run. Sometimes has trouble dominating his six-yard box, but is capable of stunning reflex saves.



Andres GUARDADO

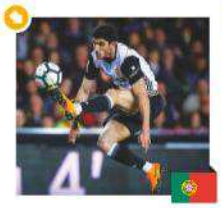
Real Betis (Spa) & Mexico

National-team captain preparing for his fourth World Cup with Mexico and playing well for an exciting Betis team since a summer switch from Holland's PSV.

Johann Berg GUDMUNDSSON

Burnley (Eng) & Iceland

New Entry Solid performer in the Premier League and a key component in the Iceland team that made Euro 2016 and the 2018 World Cup.



Goncalo GUEDES

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Portugal

New Entry Found opportunities limited at PSG but has blossomed on loan at Valencia and is hoping for a permanent deal this summer.

Paolo GUERRERO

Flamengo (Bra) & Peru

Veteran centre-forward and Peru's all-time top scorer. Set to take part in the summer's World Cup after his year-long ban for failing a drugs test was halved.

Idrissa GUEYE

Everton (Eng) & Senegal

Tough-tackling midfielder who has been one of Everton's best performers this season and will provide the midfield backbone for Senegal at the World Cup.

Peter GULACSI

RB Leipzig (Ger) & Hungary

New Entry One-time Liverpool keeper who has come through the Red Bull franchise, first in Salzburg, now Leipzig, and is being watched by a number of top clubs.

Ilkay GUNDOGAN

Manchester City (Eng) & Germany

New Entry The elegant playmaker has recovered from a serious knee injury to make an important contribution to City's chase for trophies.

Teo GUTIERREZ

Junior & Colombia

Imperious, versatile striker who has consistently been involved in controversy on and off the field. Top-class performer in the running for a World Cup place.

Jakub JANKTO

Udinese (Ita) & Czech Republic

Currently being courted by a host of Serie A and Premier League sides, Udinese's direct and dynamic Prague-born 22-year-old does not merely fill the fuel tank of his northern Italian side – he is the engine.

Over the past two seasons, he has developed into one of the most accomplished midfield operatives in Europe, with a thrilling blend of lung-busting dashes, boundless energy, an educated left foot, tactical nous and great finishing power. He is electrifying on the counter-attack and can play in a variety of positions: at ease centrally, wide on the left or in a playmaking mode, although his preferred brief is to play through the middle.

According to the Italian rumour mill, Juventus, Milan, Internazionale, Chelsea and Arsenal are all members of his fan club and "Kuba" has hinted on more than one occasion that this term could be his last season at the Stadio Friuli, stating: "I've always said that I don't want to stay in Italy for my entire career. I would like to play in another country. I'm curious and ambitious. Everyone should be like this in life."

JJ is just the latest example of Udinese's amazing aptitude for global talent-spotting in identifying a hidden gem, smoothing down the rough edges and later selling on for a substantial profit. The Jankto sums are enough to make any football capitalist swoon. Four years ago, when Udinese bought him from Slavia Prague, he cost just €700,000. Now he is worth at least €20million.

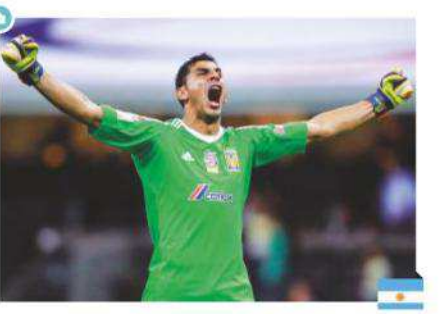
Udinese do tend to be quick off the mark when it comes to swooping for the wildly promising. Jankto was only a raw 18 when he joined them in 2014 and at that point, had not played a single game for the Slavia first-team. "Udinese first showed an interest in me after I'd scored four goals for the Czech under-18s in a game against Montenegro," he recalls.

He spent his first season in Italy learning the ropes with the Udinese youth team and then on loan to second-tier Ascoli, where he would play a key role in the club's successful battle against relegation.

On returning to Udinese at the start of last season he found himself surplus to requirements and unable to force his way into the plans of coach Giuseppe Iachini. But all was to change when Iachini was fired two months into the campaign. The new man in charge, Lugi Delneri, took an immediate liking to him and in their first-ever collaboration the Czech struck gold, firing home a fine goal at Juventus.

A fan of Arsenal and Juve in his formative years, he has 10 senior caps for the Czech Republic, making his bow in a friendly victory against Lithuania in March last year.

Nick Bidwell



Nahuel GUZMAN

Tigres (Mex) & Argentina

New Entry The outstanding keeper in the Mexican league over recent seasons, winning titles with Tigres and earning a regular spot in the Argentina squad.

Nguyen Quang HAI

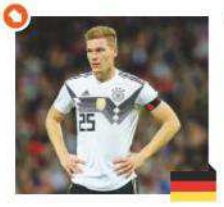
Ha Noi & Vietnam

New Entry Star of the Vietnam side that defied all the odds to reach the Final of the Asian Under-23 championship.

Achraf HAKIMI

Real Madrid (Spa) & Morocco

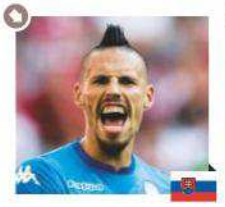
New Entry Spanish-born teenager who has emerged from the Real Madrid academy this season. Usually a right-back but can also play in central defence.



Marcel HALSTENBERG

RB Leipzig & Germany

New Entry Left-back who won his first Germany cap last year, but suffered a knee injury in January that is likely to rule him out of the World Cup.



Marek HAMSIK

Napoli (Ita) & Slovakia

Dynamic midfielder who is captain of his club and country, and recently overtook Diego Maradona to become Napoli's all-time top scorer with his 116th goal.

Amine HARIT

Schalke (Ger) & Morocco

New Entry French-born youngster who is one of the revelations of the Bundesliga season since moving from Nantes. Also made his senior debut for Morocco.

Kai HAVERTZ

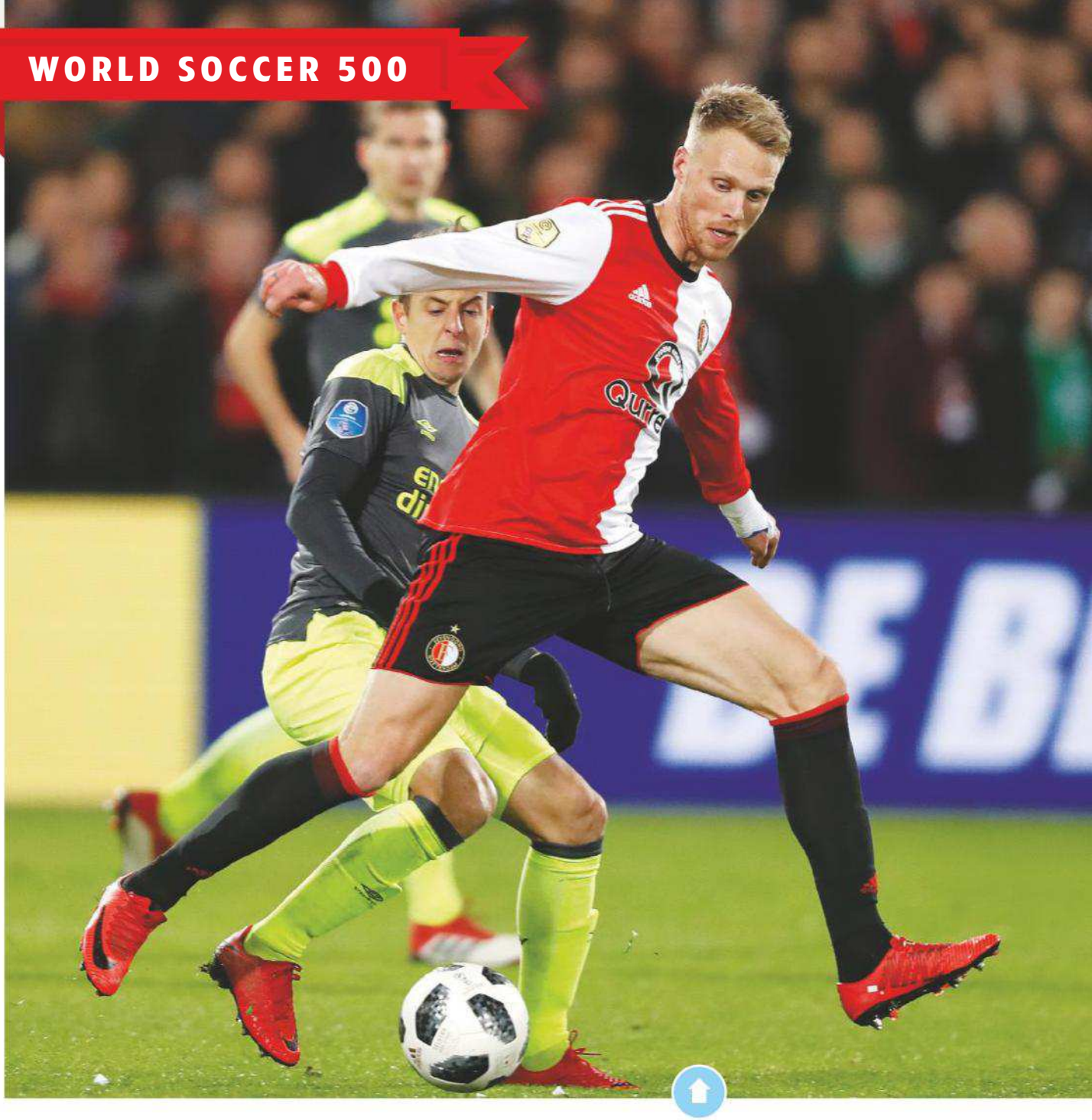
Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

New Entry Teenage starlet who became Leverkusen's youngest player last year and has since established himself as one of the Bundesliga's most exciting prospects.

Eden HAZARD

Chelsea (Eng) & Belgium

Mercurial talent who has yet to repeat the heights of his 2014-15 title-winning season for Chelsea amid speculation that Real Madrid are preparing a bid this summer.



Nicolai JORGENSEN

Feyenoord (Hol) & Denmark

No need for a meteorologist to assess the trade winds which are gusting in the vicinity of Feyenoord's 27-year-old Danish striker.

Top scorer in the Eredivisie last term with 21 goals, Jorgensen makes no secret of his burning desire to one day play in England, and during the January transfer window he was seriously wooed by Newcastle United, only for the deal to run out of steam as the Premier League side baulked at the £20million asking price.

The tall, strapping Dane was not at all pleased with that turn of events, but he will have to be patient for now.

He still has more than three years to run on his current contract with the Rotterdam club and, until the end of the season at least, he will have to knuckle down at De Kuip.

"As long as I'm here, I will give my all for this club," he told the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*. "Many footballers aspire to play in the Premier League and it's my dream as well. If I continue to work hard, I'll have that opportunity.

"I think I'm clearly ready to take that next step to England. Now I have to prove it."

Even if he is not a fluent Dutch speaker, Jorgensen has had no problem expressing himself in his 18 months at Feyenoord. Bought for only £3.1m from Copenhagen, he has an excellent all-round game, both a gifted taker and provider of chances, decent on the ball, resilient, strong in the air and mobile too, especially in his element when linking out wide.

Although Jorgensen has been known to criticise the length of warm-up routines prior to Feyenoord training sessions, that does not mean he is a lazy type.

On matchdays, he has the energy and commitment of two players, always is looking to make things happen in the final third, and pressing the ball with selflessness and tenacity. Unassuming, enterprising and ever ready to put his heart and soul on the line, he represents all the values that Feyenoord – historically one of Europe's great blue-collar clubs – hold dear.

Jorgensen might not be the paciest of forwards or a technical magician, but is nonetheless an exceptional leader of the line. When Feyenoord attack, he knits everything together: opportunistic, tuned into the collective and very consistent.

"For me, he's a really fantastic player," Robin Van Persie, now back at the club after spells abroad with Arsenal, Manchester United and Fenerbahce, said recently.

Capped 28 times by Denmark, Jorgensen came through the youth ranks of the once high and mighty Akademisk Boldklub and spent a period, from 2010 to 2012, playing in Germany for Bayer Leverkusen and Kaiserslautern.

Nick Bidwell

Jonas HECTOR

Cologne & Germany

Left-back who has been one of the few newcomers in the German national team since Euro 2016. Contracted to Cologne until 2021, but interesting other clubs.

Benjamin HENRICHS

Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

Right-back who has developed into one of the finest talents in the Bundesliga. Began his career as a youth at Leverkusen playing in midfield.

Javier HERNANDEZ

West Ham United (Eng) & Mexico

Mexico's all-time top scorer has struggled with injuries at West Ham this season, but the 29-year-old "Chicharito" remains a huge star at home.

Hector HERRERA

Porto (Por) & Mexico

New Entry Goalscoring midfielder who has been a regular for Mexico in the World Cup qualifiers and was compared by his coach to Bastian Schweinsteiger.

Gonzalo HIGUAIN

Juventus (Ita) & Argentina

At £75m, the most expensive player in Serie A history. His form for Juve has mostly justified the fee, but he remains unconvincing for Argentina.

Alejandro HOHBERG

Alianza Lima & Peru

New Entry Wide midfielder with a surprise long-range shot. Born in Peru, he is the grandson of a famous Uruguayan international.

Keisuke HONDA

Pachuca (Mex) & Japan

New Entry The veteran midfielder moved to Mexico last year and, at 31, still has something to contribute to the Japanese national side.

Lukas HRADECKY

Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) & Finland

New Entry One of the best stoppers in the Bundesliga since his 2015 move from Brondby. Began his career in Finland, who he now represents.

HULK

Shanghai SIPG (Chn) & Brazil

Powerful striker who has been one of the most successful foreign signings in the Chinese Super League, although his international career seems over.

Mats HUMMELS

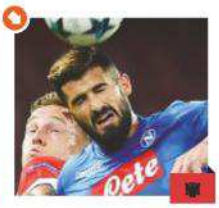
Bayern Munich & Germany

One of European football's most accomplished defenders. A title winner with Dortmund and Bayern, and a world champion with Germany in 2014.

Atiba HUTCHINSON

Besiktas (Tur) & Canada

New Entry Canada's leading player for some years is now enjoying some late-career success. Aged 35, he has won back-to-back Turkish league titles.



Elseid HYSAJ

Napoli (Ita) & Albania

New Entry Attacking right-back who helped Albania qualify for Euro 2016 and is now an important figure in Napoli's Serie A challenge. Linked with a summer transfer.

Mauro ICARDI

Internazionale (Ita) & Argentina

Prolific scorer for Inter but continues to be overlooked by Argentina. His wife Wanda, also his agent, was previously married to his Sampdoria team-mate Maxi Lopez.

Asier ILLARRAMENDI

Real Sociedad & Spain

Defensive midfielder who has excelled in a second spell at Sociedad after returning for a cut-price fee from Real Madrid.

Ciro IMMOBILE

Lazio & Italy

New Entry Much travelled striker who has found stability at Lazio after dips in form at Dortmund and Sevilla. The leading scorer in Serie A this season.

Andres INIESTA

Barcelona & Spain

Spain's 2010 World Cup hero recently agreed a "lifetime contract", whereby the 33-year-old stays at Barcelona until he retires and joins the coaching staff.

Lorenzo INSIGNE

Napoli & Italy

Short but powerful, he is an inside-forward who mostly plays on the left, looking to cut inside to create and finish chances. Born and raised in Naples.

ISCO

Real Madrid & Spain

One of Spanish football's great hopes. Played an important role in Real's last two Champions League triumphs but doubts have surfaced recently about his future.

JADSON

Corinthians & Brazil

New Entry Little midfielder with a great range of passing. In his second spell at Corinthians after a year in China.

PROFILED ALIREZA JAHANBAKHSH ON PAGE 42

Marko JANKOVIC

Partizan (Ser) & Montenegro

New Entry Winger who won the Serb title and cup last year.

PROFILED JAKUB JANKTO ON PAGE 45

Gonzalo JARA

Universidad de Chile & Chile

New Entry Centre-back whose pace made him an important member of the defensive unit of Chile's best-ever team.

Gabriel JESUS

Manchester City (Eng) & Brazil

Live wire who has adapted well to the Premier League and his form is likely to install him as Brazil's first-choice striker at the World Cup in Russia.

JONAS

Benfica (Por) & Brazil

The veteran striker is enjoying another outstanding season in Portugal, with 30 goals by the beginning of March.

PROFILED NICOLAI JORGENSEN ON PAGE 46

JORGINHO

Napoli & Italy

New Entry Brazilian-born midfielder whose form for Napoli earned him a call-up to the Italian national side.

JUANFRAN

Atletico Madrid & Spain

Now 33 but still regarded as one of the best right-backs in Europe and was notably capable of outpacing Cristiano Ronaldo in a sprint during the Madrid derby.

Pavel KADERABEK

Hoffenheim (Ger) & Czech Republic

Attacking right-back now in his third season in the Bundesliga after moving from Sparta Prague. Hoffenheim could be tempted to cash in this summer.

Nikola KALINIC

Fiorentina (Ita) & Croatia

Former Blackburn Rovers striker who has thrived in Serie A after a successful spell in Ukraine. Milan are reportedly keen to convert his loan into a permanent deal.

Harry KANE

Tottenham Hotspur & England

English football's greatest success story of recent seasons, the 24-year-old will spearhead his country's World Cup challenge, injuries permitting.

Ngolo KANTE

Chelsea (Eng) & France

Central midfield dynamo who won back-to-back league titles in England following his move from Leicester City. A summer target for Paris Saint-Germain.

Moise KEAN

Juventus & Italy

New Entry His Juve debut at 16 made him the first player born in the 2000s to play in a top European league. Capped by Italy Under-19s and currently on loan at Verona.

Naby KEITA

RB Leipzig (Ger) & Guinea

Dynamic box-to-box midfielder who is captain of his national side and will join Liverpool this July after triggering his £48m release clause and with a further £18m in potential add-ons.

Omar KHRIBIN

Al Hilal (Sau) & Syria

New Entry Voted Asian Footballer of the Year in 2017 for his role in Syria's run to the World Cup play-offs and Al Hilal's 2017 Asian Champions League Final spot.

KI Sung-yeung

Swansea City (Eng) & South Korea

New Entry Has a reduced role at Swansea but the 29-year-old remains a central figure for South Korea, and is closing in on 100 caps.

Joshua KIMMICH

Bayern Munich & Germany

Versatile 22-year-old who has mostly been deployed as a right-back by Bayern this season, prompting comparisons with his predecessor Philipp Lahm.

KOKE

Atletico Madrid & Spain

At 26, the Madrid-born midfielder has already played more than 350 times for Atletico. Has been capped by Spain at all levels from under-16 upwards.

Aleksandr KOKORIN

Zenit & Russia

New Entry A regular scorer in the Russian league, for Dynamo and Zenit, but has not yet managed to transfer that form to the national side.

Vincent KOMPANY

Manchester City (Eng) & Belgium

New Entry The 31-year-old influential captain of club and country is approaching 10 years at City. Has spent his injury-hit time on the sidelines gaining an MBA.

Geoffrey KONDOGBIA

Internazionale (Ita) & France

New Entry Only 25 but the subject of high-profile transfers to Sevilla, Monaco and Internazionale. Has now found stability on loan at Valencia.

KOO Ja-cheol

Augsburg (Ger) & South Korea

New Entry One of South Korea's most successful exports to the Bundesliga, he has been troubled by injury of late but will hope to play a crucial role at the World Cup.

Cheikhou KOUYATE

West Ham United (Eng) & Senegal

New Entry Powerful central midfielder who has struggled in this season's Premier League but will provide a tough backbone to Senegal's midfield at the World Cup.

Michael KRMENCIK

Viktoria Plzen & Czech Republic

New Entry Striker who was the main highlight of the Czechs' unsuccessful World Cup qualifying campaign. Heavily linked with a move to England.

Toni KROOS

Real Madrid (Spa) & Germany

One of the world's most accomplished midfielders, an automatic first-choice for club and country. Said to be Manchester United's main transfer target this summer.

Yuya KUBO

Gent (Blg) & Japan

New Entry Has adapted well to life in Europe, first at Young Boys and now in Belgium. Part of a new wave of players making their mark on Japan's national side.

William KVIST

Copenhagen & Denmark

New Entry Tough-tackling defensive midfielder who is back at Copenhagen as captain and still a key member of the Danish team that qualified for the 2018 World Cup.

Yann KARAMOH

Caen (Fra) & Ivory Coast

On a two-year loan at Internazionale, who have an option to buy the 19-year-old who has played for France at all levels from under-16 to under-21.

Justin KLUIVERT

Ajax & Holland

New Entry Left winger and the son of former Holland striker Patrick. Made his Ajax debut at 16 and recently earned his first senior Holland call-up.

Kalidou KOULIBALY

Napoli (Ita) & Senegal

One of the leading figures in Napoli's chase of Serie A honours, as well as in Senegal's World Cup qualification. Linked with a big-money move to England.

Zakaria LABYAD

Utrecht (Hol) & Morocco

New Entry Enjoying an excellent season back in Holland after a spell in Portugal. Played for Holland under-17s but has since switched to Morocco's seniors.

LEE Dong-gook

Jeonbuk Motors & South Korea

Having played at the 1998 World Cup, the veteran hitman has an outside chance of appearing at this summer's tournament as well, despite the fact that he will have turned 39 by the time it all kicks off in Russia.

For a man nicknamed "the Lion King" due to an early hairstyle, an ability to find the back of the net has always been a source of pride.

Even before this season's K-League had begun in March he was among the goals.

In their opening game of the 2018 Asian Champions League, Jeonbuk Motors were two goals down at home to Kashiwa Reysol of Japan before he pulled one back. And then, with the scores level at 2-2, he curled home a delightful shot from just inside the area with five minutes remaining. He also scored in the following game, a 6-0 thrashing of Hong Kong's Kitchee, to extend his career haul to 35 – a competition record that is even more impressive given the fact that he didn't make his debut in the tournament until he was in his thirties.

That was in 2010, when he joined Jeonbuk, not long after his return from England. It is unfortunate that his international reputation appears to be defined by a spell in the Premier League with Middlesbrough, where he failed to find the net in the league and was quickly dismissed as a flop.

That was tough for a player who had suffered a serious injury in April 2006, when a cruciate-ligament tear ended his chances of appearing at that summer's World Cup at a time when he was in great form and Dick Advocaat's clear choice to lead the Korean line.

Having played in his country's final game of 1998 in France, he was surprisingly left out by Guus Hiddink four years later but made the 2010 World Cup squad after finding a club side that was perfect for him.

At Jeonbuk he has won five league titles, been named the MVP four times and become the K-League's all-time record goalscorer.

A call-up this summer is unlikely but not impossible. Shin Tae-yong summoned him to his first squad for the final two qualifiers on the road to Russia, and the coach is not averse to making a few surprises.

If the goals continue this season, there may just be a place in Russia for a proven goalscorer who made his debut at the finals 20 years ago.

John Duerden

Max MEYER

Schalke & Germany

New Entry A change in alignment is working wonders for Schalke starlet Max Meyer. Previously known as a gifted attacking all-rounder, the 22-year-old has been flourishing this term in a new guise as a midfield holder.

In his five years as a first-team regular with the Royal Blues, the diminutive Meyer has never played to such a high standard. Up until this season, few could have imagined the ball-playing ace in such a physical demanding role. All credit then to rookie Schalke coach Domenico Tedesco for the brainwave. "I think Max has just found the position which best corresponds to his strengths," says Tedesco.

It is incredible how different Schalke coaches have utilised Meyer in so many varied ways. Last season, under Markus Weinzierl, he was a second striker or centre-forward. Prior to that, Andre Breitenreiter played him on the left wing, while Roberto Di Matteo saw him as a number 10.

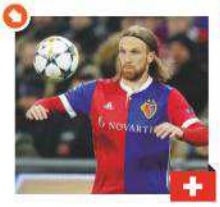
After almost a decade at the Ruhr club, Meyer has, at last, discovered his real vocation. "This deeper position suits me," he declared at the turn of the year. "I'm on the ball a lot, and from back there I can open up the game."

The irony is that his Schalke adventure seems to be drawing to a bitter close. Over the last six months he has twice rejected offers of a new deal – rumoured to be worth €5.5million per season in salary – and with his contract due to expire shortly a free-transfer exit is looming.

Barcelona are believed to be interested, as are a number of the Premier League top-six sides and Bundesliga kingpins Bayern Munich. A childhood Bayern fan, the teenage Meyer had an unsuccessful trial there.

Meyer has certainly crammed a lot of positive experiences into his career thus far. He is a "veteran" of almost 150 Bundesliga games for Schalke and boasts an extensive international honours board: four full caps, a silver medal from the Rio Olympics in 2016 and a European title with the under-21s last year.

Nick Bidwell



Michael LANG

Basle & Switzerland

Right-back who is excelling for Basle in the Champions League and for the Swiss national side. Could be sold in the summer before his contract expires in 2019.

Aymeric LAPORTE

Manchester City (Eng) & France

City's record signing at £57m but has yet to play for the senior French national side.

PROFILED
LEE DONG-GOOK
ON PAGE 49

LEE Jae-sung

Jeonbuk Motors & South Korea

Midfielder and current international who is one of the best players in the K-League.

Thomas LEMAR

Monaco & France

Came to prominence during Monaco's successes last season, the 22-year-old midfielder is widely expected to depart in a big-money transfer this summer.

Pedro LEON

Eibar & Spain

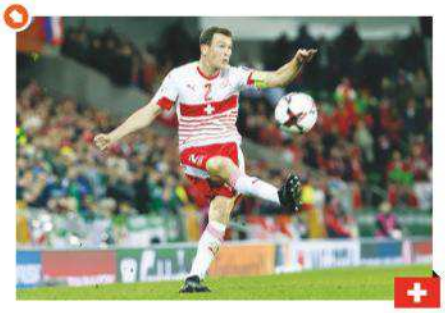
New Entry

Outstanding in Eibar's remarkable La Liga rise. Revived his career at Getafe after a 2010 move to Jose Mourinho's Real Madrid turned sour.

Robert LEWANDOWSKI

Bayern Munich (Ger) & Poland

Continues to make goalscoring look so easy. Top scorer in Europe's World Cup qualifiers with 16 goals. Real Madrid links refuse to go away.



Stephan LICHTSTEINER

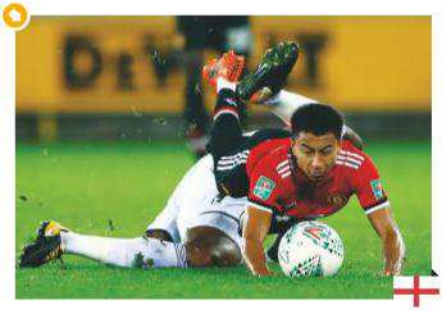
Juventus (Ita) & Switzerland

Veteran right-back who, at 33, is no longer an automatic choice at Juventus. However, he will still most likely captain his country at the World Cup this summer.

Lucas LIMA

Palmeiras & Brazil

Creative, left-footed midfielder with the capacity to organise the game from box to box. The move to wealthy Palmeiras could put him on the path to glory.



Jesse LINGARD

Manchester United & England

Has shown a big-match mentality for United this season, scoring crucial goals against Premier League rivals. In contention for a World Cup starting berth.

Marko LIVAJA

Las Palmas (Spa) & Croatia

New Entry Only 24 but has already played for clubs in Italy, Spain, Russia and now on loan in Greece, where AEK could end Oympiakos' grip on the league title.

Hugo LLORIS

Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & France

One of Europe's top keepers, he is under contract until 2022. Is Spurs' top earner, along with Harry Kane. Captain of both club and country.

Nicolas LODEIRO

Seattle Sounders (USA) & Uruguay

One of the big success stories of Major League Soccer, having inspired Seattle to the 2016 title after a high-profile move from Boca Juniors.

Gaston LODICO

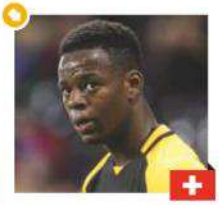
Lanus & Argentina

New Entry Creative midfielder enjoying a splendid start to his debut season. Catches the eye with his dribbling skills, vision and capacity to pick a pass.

Anthony LOPES

Lyon (Fra) & Portugal

New Entry Born and raised in France, but qualifies to play for Portugal through his parents. Was a non-playing member of Portugal's victorious Euro 2016 squad.



Jordan LOTOMBA

Young Boys & Switzerland

New Entry Teenager who can operate at right-back or as a winger and has been one of the stars of Young Boys' runaway domestic league campaign this term.

Hirving LOZANO

PSV (Hol) & Mexico

The great hope of Mexican football was his country's top scorer in World Cup qualifying. Has taken Dutch football by storm in his first season.

LUAN

Gremio & Brazil

Elegant support striker, clever at finding space between opposing lines. Voted best player in South America last year. At 24, has he left it too late to play for a top European club?

LUIZ GUSTAVO

Marseille (Fra) & Brazil

New Entry Defensive midfielder who made the move to Ligue 1 from Wolfsburg last summer after 10 years in Germany and has quickly become a fans' favourite.

Romelu LUKAKU

Manchester United (Eng) & Belgium

Powerful striker who cost United £75m last summer, reuniting with Jose Mourinho – the manager who sold him from Chelsea to Everton in July 2014 for £28m.

Riyad MAHREZ

Leicester City (Eng) & Algeria

The star of Leicester's 2016 title win failed to secure a move to Manchester City in January, sparking a 10-day walkout. Is expected to push for an exit again.

Lovro MAJER

Lokomotiva and Croatia

New Entry Skilful attacking midfielder who is set to leave Zagreb club Lokomotiva this summer, with a few English teams leading the chase.

Tomoaki MAKINO

Urawa Red Diamonds & Japan

New Entry Centre-back who was one of the stalwarts of Urawa Reds' victory in last year's Asian Champions League and the only one to play every minute of the competition.

MALCOM

Bordeaux (Fra) & Brazil

One of the most exiting talents in the French top flight, Bordeaux are preparing to host a bidding war for the 21-year-old's services this summer.

Mario MANDZUKIC

Juventus (Ita) & Croatia

Experienced campaigner who is highly effective as a target man but has also been deployed by Juve coach Max Allegri wide on the left. Is a big physical presence and strong in the air.

Sadio MANE

Liverpool (Eng) & Senegal

Speedy, mobile attacker in fine form for club and country. Effective on the left side of a three-man Liverpool attack – with Firmino and Salah – that has not missed Philippe Coutinho.

Petros MANTALOS

AEK & Greece

New Entry Captain of runaway Greek league leaders AEK who recently extended his contract until 2022. Won his first senior cap while still playing in the Greek second tier.

MARCELO

Real Madrid (Spa) & Brazil

Arguably the world's finest attacking left-back, a stalwart at Real Madrid since 2007 and back in the Brazil squad after the humiliation of the 2014 World Cup semi-final thrashing.

Agustin MARCHESIN

America (Mex) & Argentina

New Entry One of the most effective keepers in the Mexican league. Recalled to the Argentina squad by new coach Jorge Sampaoli.

MARQUINHOS

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Brazil

New Entry One of the world's best young centre-backs. Named by Brazil coach Tite as one of the 15 players who he will definitely select for the World Cup. Aged just 23, he has already played more than 200 games in Serie A and Ligue 1 over six seasons.

Henry MARTIN

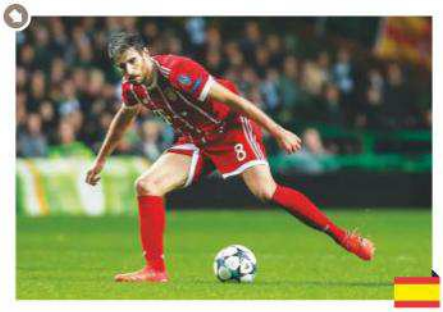
America & Mexico

New Entry One of the leading Mexican strikers in the Liga MX, he has enjoyed a bright start to his time at America after a move from Tijuana. Recently recalled to the national team.

Inigo MARTINEZ

Athletic Bilbao & Spain

Centre-back signed by Athletic Bilbao from Basque rivals Real Sociedad in January with the proceeds of their sale of Aymeric Laporte to Manchester City. Had been tipped for a move abroad.



Javi MARTINEZ

Bayern Munich (Ger) & Spa

Bayern's record signing at €40m from Athletic Bilbao in 2012 has mostly been deployed as a centre-back but was recently used in defensive midfield by Bayern's interim coach Jupp Heynckes. Recovered from a serious knee injury which saw him miss the 2014-15 season.

Lautaro MARTINEZ

Racing & Argentina

New Entry Centre-forward currently making a big name for himself. Received his first call-up for Argentina in March after a sensational start to the 2018 Libertadores Cup.

Nemanja MATIC

Manchester United (Eng) & Serbia

Central midfielder who was surprisingly sold by Chelsea last summer. Originally an attacking midfielder, he was switched to a more defensive role by Jorge Jesus at Benfica.

Blaise MATUIDI

Juventus (Ita) & France

Experienced, dynamic ball-winning midfielder who made an £18m switch to Juventus last summer, a year after a deal had first been mooted. Has turned 30 but still a regular for France.

Philipp MAX

Augsburg & Germany

New Entry Left-back who has enjoyed a remarkable rise this season, providing more assists than any other Bundesliga player. Son of former Germany striker Martin Max.

Noussair MAZRAOUI

Ajax (Hol) & Morocco

New Entry Talented 20-year-old tipped for big things in Amsterdam after coming through the ranks. Born in Holland but has played for Morocco's under-20s.

Kylian MBAPPE

Paris Saint-Germain & France

The sensation of last season has surprised many with the ease with which he has coped with the spotlight in Paris, alongside Neymar, following his €145m "loan" from Monaco.

Jesus MEDINA

New York City (USA) & Paraguay

New Entry Signed as a replacement for Jack Harrison, who joined parent club Manchester City, much is expected in New York of the talented 20-year-old.

Stefan MEDINA

Monterrey (Mex) & Colombia

New Entry Right-back who has won successive league titles in Mexico with Pachuca and Monterrey as well as the 2017 CONCACAF Champions League.

Aleksei MIRANCHUK

Lokomotiv Moscow & Russia

New Entry After several years of struggling to live up to the *wunderkind* tag, interspersing sublime moments of skill with periods of anonymity, the 22-year-old finally seems to have solved the problem of his untapped potential.

Once constantly pilloried for his alleged lack of hunger, resolve and character, he has turned things around this term, with his goals, creativity and enthusiasm putting Lokomotiv in with a real chance of winning their first Russian league title since 2004.

In his six previous seasons with the Lokomotiv first team he has never been so bold and confident, and a host of top European clubs – among them Milan, Roma, Bayern Munich and Porto – are now reported to be tracking him.

Should a lucrative move pan out he will owe a huge debt of gratitude to Yuri Semin, who has been his club coach for the past 18 months.

While many previous bosses regarded him as a luxury performer who they could not rely on, Semin has backed him to the hilt, convinced of the necessity of building a team around him, and a fluid 4-2-3-1 formation has proved the ideal framework in which to flourish. The front four have licence to roam and are all interchangeable – which is meat and drink for someone of his expressive qualities as he can play in his favourite slot just behind the striker, wide right or left, or even as the lone front runner.

Capped 14 times for Russia since Fabio Capello handed him his debut against Belarus in July 2015, he is not yet an automatic selection for the national side but is undoubtedly moving in that direction. Last autumn he was picked regularly by Stanislav Cherchesov and was particularly impressive in a 3-3 friendly draw with Spain in November, making one goal and scoring another. A World Cup on home soil would be a made-to-measure stage.

His twin brother, Anton, lines up alongside him for both Lokomotiv and Russia, and apart from a spell when his midfielder sibling was on loan at Estonian side Levadia the pair have been inseparable throughout their careers.

Don't, however, mention the Miranchuk twins to Spartak Moscow officials. Once pupils at the Spartak academy, the brothers were cast aside by the club in 2012 and told in no uncertain terms that they were too frail for the rigours of the professional game.

Nick Bidwell

Dries MERTENS

Napoli (Ita) & Belgium

Converted winger deployed as a central striker by Napoli coach Maurizio Sarri.

Lionel MESSI

Barcelona (Spa) & Argentina

The world's best player continues to re-write the record books. The best ever? Most probably.

Thomas MEUNIER

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Belgium

New Entry Goalscoring right-back who could leave Paris after falling down the pecking order.

PROFILED MAX MEYER ON PAGE 50

John Obi MIKEL

Tianjin TEDA (Chn) & Nigeria

New Entry Winding down his club career in China but still an essential part of the Nigeria national side, where he plays a more attacking role.

Sergej MILINKOVIC-SAVIC

Lazio (Ita) & Serbia

New Entry One of the brightest talents in Serie A, a 6ft 4in attacker tipped to star in Serbia's World Cup squad. Lazio are expecting serious bids this summer.

Yerry MINA

Barcelona (Spa) & Colombia

Tall, commanding centre-back who joined Barcelona in January but has yet to establish a first-team place with his new side.

MIRANDA

Internazionale (Ita) & Brazil

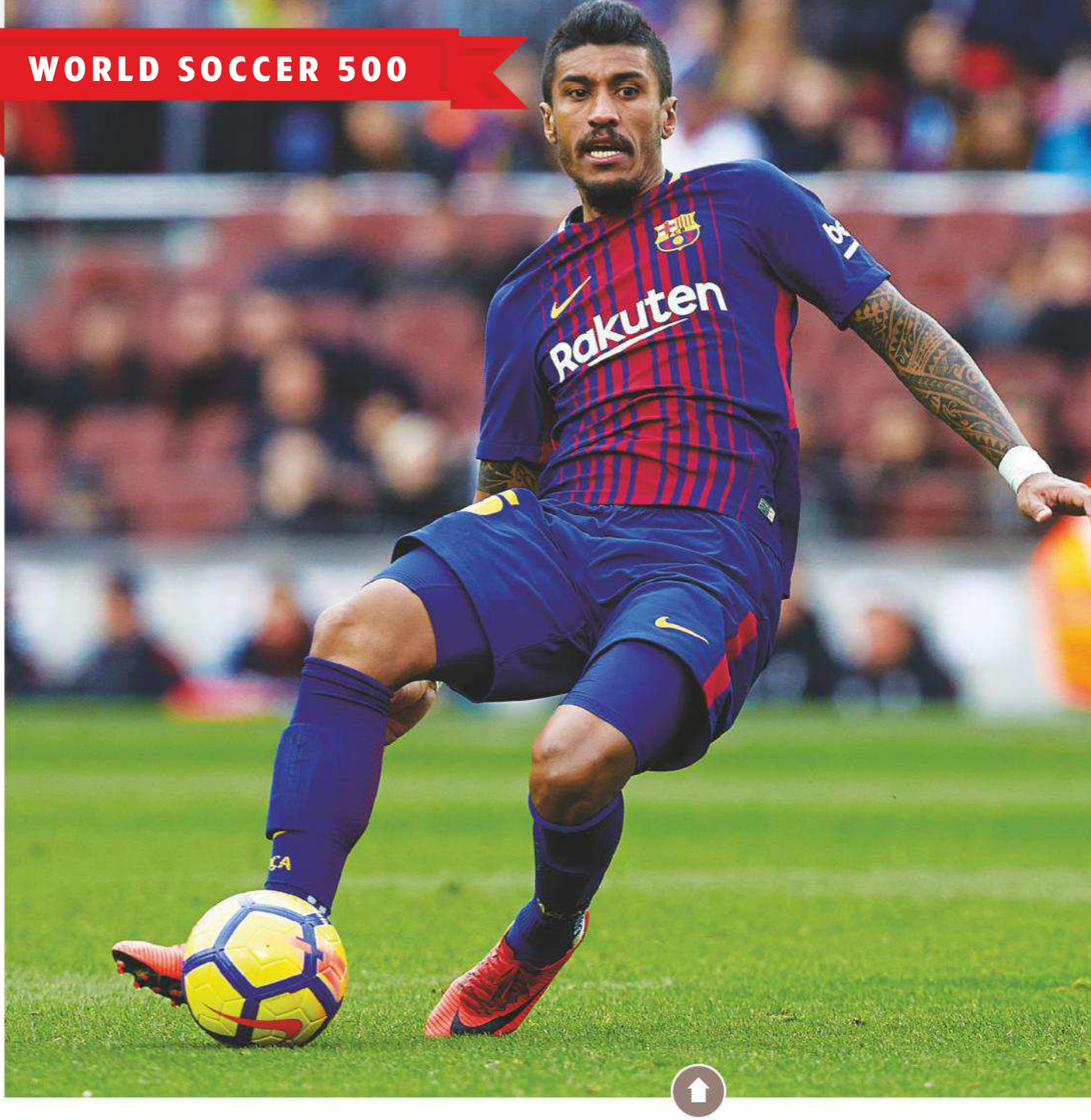
Experienced centre-back and another of Brazil coach Tite's key men in Russia. The 33-year-old has a year left on his Inter contract.

PROFILED ALEKSEI MIRANCHUK ON PAGE 53

Henrikh MKHITARYAN

Arsenal (Eng) & Armenia

Armenia's finest player has yet to reproduce his best form in England but his move to Arsenal appears to be a better fit than Jose Mourinho's Manchester United.



PAULINHO

Barcelona (Spa) & Brazil

The Brazilian's €40million move from the Chinese Super League to Barcelona last summer was notable for bucking the trend of big-money signings moving to the Far East.

Far from winding down his career in China, the 29-year-old had revived his fortunes after moving to Guangzhou Evergrande from Tottenham Hotspur, where he had struggled to make an impact in the Premier League despite being the club's then record signing at £17m from Sao Paulo club Corinthians.

Brazil coach Tite – his former boss at Corinthians when they won the Libertadores Cup and Club World Cup – recalled Paulinho to the national squad when he took charge in 2016, and he recently named the midfielder as one of the 15 players considered to have already booked their places in Brazil's World Cup squad.

That Paulinho is now playing at the top level of European football for Barcelona will have made his decision all the easier.

"Paulinho is evolving and he is raising his level," Tite said last autumn as Brazil prepared to play their final World Cup qualifiers. "From my point of view, the reason for that is he's playing in Barcelona's system of support and collaboration.

"He is a box-to-box player, but he has good intuition and perception of play, which are among the best features of his game, so he will do very well for Barcelona."

"Just to confirm, during the transfer window, I didn't give any advice, not to Paulinho nor to any other Brazilians about where they should play.

"I don't think I have that right and I don't want to interfere in the work managers and directors are doing at their various clubs."

Paulinho recently complained that he had been played out of position on the wing at Tottenham, although the reality was that his attributes were not best utilised in a holding midfield role in the hustle and bustle of the Premier League. At Barcelona he has benefitted from a change in style by new boss Ernesto Valverde, who opted for a more midfield-focused system following the loss of Neymar to Paris Saint-Germain.

Although there remains a fluidity to Barca's play, Valverde has often deployed 4-4-2, with Lionel Messi buzzing behind central striker Luis Suarez. Messi remains the key man, his brilliance shining through as Barca have led the Liga title race at some distance from closest challengers Atletico Madrid. But Paulinho has helped to bring a new resilience to midfield.

The arrival of Philippe Coutinho, ostensibly as long-term replacement for Andres Iniesta, could yet impact on Paulinho's midfield duties and responsibilities. But in the Champions League, where Coutinho is cup-tied, and with Iniesta's physical presence on the wane, Paulinho has an important role to play.

John Holmesdale

Luka MODRIC

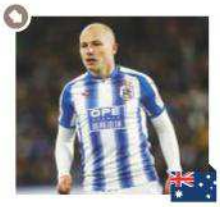
Real Madrid (Spa) & Croatia

Arguably the world's best midfielder, he recently appeared in a Croatian court accused of perjury during the tax fraud trial of businessman Zdravko Mamic.

Jefferson MONTERO

Swansea City (Eng) & Ecuador

New Entry Can this dazzling winger recover on loan at Emelec, the club where his career started? Impossible to mark on his day, but frequently infuriating and, of late, injured.



Aaron MOOY

Huddersfield Town (Eng) & Australia

New Entry Australia's most talented player who was promoted with Huddersfield while on loan from Manchester City via Melbourne City.

Alvaro MORATA

Chelsea (Eng) & Spain

Chelsea's record signing has struggled to justify his £60m price tag since a summer move from Real Madrid, although injuries have impacted on his effectiveness.

Ryota MORIOKA

Anderlecht (Blg) & Japan

New Entry In-form attacking midfielder who has enjoyed a dramatic first season in Belgium, earning a January move to Anderlecht from Waasland-Beveren.

Victor MOSES

Chelsea (Eng) & Nigeria

Winger who has been switched to wing-back by Antonio Conte at Chelsea. Arrived in England as a teenage orphan from Nigeria after his parents were murdered.

Mason MOUNT

Chelsea & England

New Entry Thriving at Holland's Vitesse, on loan from Chelsea. Player of the tournament when England won last year's European under-19 title.

Joao MOUTINHO

Monaco (Fra) & Portugal

New Entry Experienced playmaker whose influence is waning at Monaco while retaining his place with European champions Portugal.

Youssef MSAKNI

Al Duhail (Qat) & Tunisia

New Entry The main creative force in a Tunisia team preparing for the 2018 World Cup. Opted to earn petrodollars in Qatar rather than display his talents in Europe.

Nordi MUKIELE

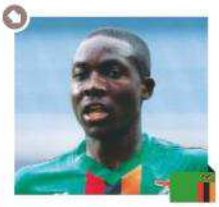
Montpellier & France

New Entry Under-21 defender who is being watched by many of Europe's top clubs. Born in France to Congolese parents and could still play for DR Congo seniors.

Thomas MULLER

Bayern Munich & Germany

Not blessed with great pace or power but a fine exploiter of space, hence the nickname "*Raumdeuter*" – which roughly translates as "space interpreter".



Enock MWEPU

Salzburg (Aut) & Zambia

New Entry One of the star performers in the Zambia squad at last year's Under-20 World Cup. Signed by the Red Bull talent-spotters and loaned out to Liefering.

Yuto NAGATOMO

Internazionale (Ita) & Japan

New Entry One of the most successful Japanese exports to Europe. In his eighth season at Inter, and sent on loan to Galatasaray in January.

Darlington NAGBE

Atlanta United & USA

Liberian-born midfielder who joined Atlanta after six years at Portland Timbers. Won the 2017 CONCACAF Gold Cup. Son of former Liberia captain Joe Nagbe.

Radja NAINGGOLAN

Roma (Ita) & Belgium

All-action midfielder, nicknamed "the Ninja". Moved to Italy as a teenager, becaming a key figure for Roma, but has become unsettled this season.

Shoya NAKAJIMA

Portimonense (Por) & Japan

New Entry Left-winger who has enjoyed a sensational start in Portugal, with Portimonense turning his loan from Tokyo into a permanent deal in January.

Kengo NAKAMURA

Kawasaki Frontale & Japan

New Entry Now 37, the midfielder has spent his entire career at the same club. Won the J.League title last year, 12 months after being voted the league's best player.

NALDO

Schalke (Ger) & Brazil

New Entry Veteran centre-back whose form in the Bundesliga for Schalke, including the scoring of several goals, has placed him on the radar of Brazil national coach Tite.

Keylor NAVAS

Real Madrid (Spa) & Costa Rica

The most high-profile Costa Rican and the only national-team star playing regularly for his European club. Heavily tipped to leave the Bernabeu this summer.

Tanguy NDOMBELE

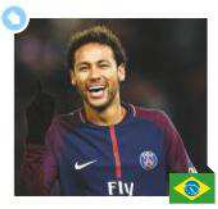
Amiens & France

New Entry Powerful 21-year-old midfielder whose progress since joining Lyon on loan last summer has been phenomenal. Some have called for a senior France call-up.

Manuel NEUER

Bayern Munich & Germany

The world's top keeper has been out of action since suffering another fracture to a foot bone last September. He expects to return before the end of the season.



NEYMAR

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Brazil

The world's most expensive footballer at €222m, he is facing a race to be fit in time for the World Cup after fracturing a foot bone in February.

Nemanja NIKOLIC

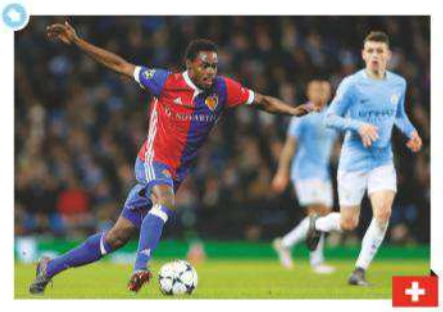
Chicago Fire (USA) & Hungary

Yugoslav-born Hungarian international who has enjoyed a fine start in MLS after making his name with a prolific 2015-16 season in Poland with 40 goals for Legia.

Steven NZONZI

Sevilla (Spa) & France

Former Blackburn and Stoke midfield destroyer who has thrived in a more creative role for Sevilla, earning rave reviews and senior caps for France.



Dimitri OBERLIN

Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) & Switzerland

New Entry Cameroon-born speedster who came though Swiss youth football before being signed by Salzburg aged 17 in 2015. Impressive on loan to Basle this term.

Jan OBLAK

Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Slovenia

Fast gaining a reputation as one of the world's top keepers. Touted as Petr Cech's long-term replacement at Arsenal.

Guillermo OCHOA

Standard Liege (Blg) & Mexico

New Entry Moved to Standard Liege last summer after relegation with Granada and wears the number eight shirt. Approaching 100 caps.

Martin ODEGAARD

Real Madrid (Spa) & Norway

New Entry Now 19, the midfielder signed by Real Madrid amid much fanfare in 2015 is quietly making a name for himself in Holland, on loan at Heerenveen.

Shinji OKAZAKI

Leicester City (Eng) & Japan

Energetic, hard-running striker who starred in Leicester's remarkable 2016 title win. At the World Cup, he will be looking to add to his tally of 50 international goals.

Henry ONYEKURU

Everton (Eng) & Nigeria

The Nigerian was signed by Everton after impressing at Eupen last year but sent out on loan to Anderlecht where he suffered a serious knee injury.

Nicolas OTAMENDI

Manchester City (Eng) & Argentina

New Entry The Argentinian centre-back has thrived under Pep Guardiola at City this season, earning a contract extension until 2022, when he will be 34.

Romulo OTERO

Atletico Mineiro (Bra) & Venezuela

Little attacker who stands out for his superb free-kicks. Made his name with Caracas, and moved to Brazil in 2016 after a brief spell in Chile.

Alfio OVIEDO

Cerro Porteno & Paraguay

New Entry Bright, perky striker who had an excellent 2017, first with Independiente of Campo Grande, and then joining the Asuncion giants Cerro Porteno.

Mesut OZIL

Arsenal (Eng) & Germany

Arsenal's chief creator looked to be on his way out of the club, with his contract running down, before agreeing a new deal worth a whopping £350,000 a week.

Dani PAREJO

Valencia & Spain

New Entry Attacking midfielder, once of Queens Park Rangers, who has played a major role, as captain, in Marcelino's revival of Valencia this term.

Thomas PARTEY

Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Ghana

New Entry Has helped Atletico contemplate the eventual retirement of Gabi. Reached the semi-finals of the 2017 Africa Nations Cup with Ghana.

Rui PATRICIO

Sporting & Portugal

Portugal's Euro-winning keeper is in his 12th season at Sporting, missing only a handful of games.

PAULINHO

Vasco da Gama & Brazil

New Entry One of the stars of last year's World Under-17 Cup. Stands out with well timed bursts into the box.

PROFILED **PAULINHO** ON PAGE 54

Benjamin PAVARD

Stuttgart (Ger) & France

New Entry Has quickly established himself as a defensive lynchpin at Stuttgart this season, winning his first cap for the French senior side in November.

Cristian PAVON

Boca Juniors & Argentina

Quick winger, usually used on the right but capable of floating across, who has become a key part of the Boca attack and has been strongly linked with European clubs.

Dimitri PAYET

Marseille & France

Technically gifted, he left West Ham United in controversial circumstances last year and is a key man for Marseille despite slipping down the France pecking order.

Pietro PELLEGRI

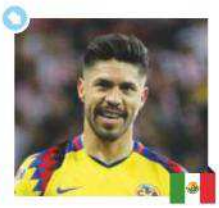
Monaco (Fra) & Italy

New Entry Signed for £17m by Monaco in January after a precocious start at Genoa, where he became the first player born in 2001 to score in Serie A.

PEPE

Besiktas (Tur) & Portugal

Brazilian-born centre-back often criticised for cynical gamesmanship. Remains the bedrock of the Portuguese defence even at the age of 35.



Oribe PERALTA

America & Mexico

Now 34, but still a consistent scorer in the Mexican league. Star of Mexico's 2012 Olympic triumph and a contender for the country's World Cup squad.

Andre ONANA

Ajax (Hol) & Cameroon

New Entry In the great Ajax tradition of sweeper-keepers. Now 21, he spent time at Barcelona's academy before a switch to Amsterdam aged 18.

Leandro PAREDES

Zenit (Rus) & Argentina

Versatile operator who has impressed as part of Roberto Mancini's Argentinian clan in St Petersburg, prompting talk of a big-money move to Spain this summer.

Jiri PAVLENKA

Werder Bremen (Ger) & Czech Republic

New Entry Has had an outstanding first campaign in the Bundesliga since a move from Slavia Prague. The long-term heir to Petr Cech.

Ivan PERISIC

Internazionale (Ita) and Croatia

Lively wide man who has thrived in Italy since a 2015 move from the Bundesliga. Heavily linked with a move to Manchester United in recent months.

Marcel SABITZER

RB Leipzig (Ger) & Austria

Apart from the pain of dislocating his shoulder in a Champions League tie with Monaco in November, the multi-dimensional RB Leipzig schemer has had much to celebrate of late: his major contribution to his newly promoted club's stunning silver medal in last season's Bundesliga, his recent nomination by *Kicker* magazine as the best attacking midfielder in Germany and his Austrian Player of the Year award for 2017.

It's high time the 24-year-old was sent blinking into the full glare of the media searchlight. For far too long he has not received the recognition he was due, almost completely overshadowed by the *Leipziger* star chamber of Naby Keita, Emil Forsberg and Timo Werner.

In his own low-key style, "Sabi" is just as important to the *Roten Bullen*. Indeed, if anyone represents the footballing ideals of the young Saxon club it is him.

He is a composite picture of physicality, dynamism, speed in transition, game intelligence and goal-bound wiles. What's more, he can be unleashed in many different ways: on either flank, as a playmaker or as a deep-lying striker.

"I've a little bit of all those roles in me," he smiles.

RB coach Ralph Hasenhuttl would not disagree: "He makes up the complete package of attacking and defensive skills plus a strong mentality. You always can be sure of a great performance from him. He's the same whether it's snowing or the sun's out.

"He is someone who will roll up his sleeves and step forward in a tight game."

Now in his third season at RB, Sabitzer was almost pre-destined to be a top-ranking footballer. His father, Herfried, was an Austrian international striker in the 1990s and it would not take long for young Marcel to make his mark in the game, only 16 when breaking into the pro eleven at Admira Wacker Modling and winning his first full cap two years later, in a friendly with Romania in June 2012.

Unlike so many other talent-laden youngsters who insist on leaping frontiers as soon as humanly possible, Sabitzer, encouraged by his dad, always had a more patient approach to getting ahead.

Back in 2012, at the age of 18, he turned down a move to Bundesliga giants Schalke and wisely has stuck to the same basic development track, with the emphasis on playing time and a string of onwards and upwards staging posts such as Admira, Rapid Vienna and Salzburg in his homeland, then RB Leipzig from 2015.

"In my late teens I sat down with my family and my agent and put together a careen plan, to project where I wanted to go and how," Sabitzer told *Sport Bild* magazine early this year.

"Every day I look to pursue these goals. The next stage is for me to consistently play in the Champions League."

Marcel Sabitzer: on time, on schedule.

Nick Bidwell

Carlos TEVEZ

Boca Juniors & Argentina

World Soccer first featured Carlos Tevez as "one to watch" in 2000, when Boca Juniors were attempting to fit the teenager into the hole left by the departure of playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme to Barcelona.

The following year he made his name by spearheading the club's triumphant Libertadores Cup campaign at centre-forward. And from that point on the relevant comparison was with a previous, even bigger Boca and national idol.

With his stocky build, tight skills and poor-boy-from-the-wrong-side-of-the-tracks background there were obvious similarities with Maradona. But his appointment in Argentina as Diego's heir maybe left him psychologically unprepared to deal with the rise of Lionel Messi.

He has certainly found it very hard to integrate into the national team and his record of 13 goals in 76 games for his country does not even count as mediocre.

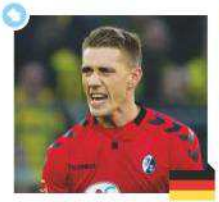
Yet still the fans believe in him. After a year in Brazil, nine seasons in Europe and a lucrative but deeply disappointing spell in China that he recently described as "a holiday", he is back at Boca with the team well on course to win the league title. The main objective, of course, is another Libertadores success, a decade and a half after he first came to prominence.

Many in the local media seem determined to also shoehorn him back into the Argentina squad for Russia 2018, and the player himself has described the prospect of another crack at the World Cup as "a consecration" – a religious term which captures the tone of some of the worship around him.

However, on initial evidence, a place in Jorge Sampaoli's squad for Russia this summer would seem unlikely. Now lacking the necessary pace to be an out-and-out number nine, he has been employed in a deeper role with Boca, playing off the centre-forward – and it hasn't been the easiest of transitions for him. And in the national team that, of course, is Messi's position.

Still, after a year spent playing in the Chinese wilderness, for Boca Juniors supporters it is more than enough just to see their idol back in a blue-and-yellow shirt.

Tim Vickery



Nils PETERSEN

Freiburg & Germany

New Entry Much-travelled striker whose goals have steered Freiburg away from the Bundesliga relegation zone. Being touted for Germany's World Cup squad.

Maximilian PHILIPP

Borussia Dortmund & Germany

New Entry Versatile young attacker who cost Dortmund €20m last summer when he signed from Freiburg. Enjoyed a bright start to the season before injury intervened.

Gerard PIQUE

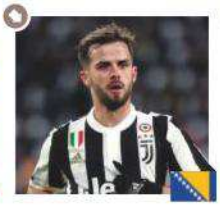
Barcelona & Spain

One of the world's top defenders and an eloquent figure off the pitch. Married to pop star Shakira, he is being tipped to pursue a political career when he retires.

Lukasz PISZCZEK

Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Poland

Former striker turned rampaging right-back. Scored a vital winning goal for Poland, against Montenegro, in their World Cup qualifying campaign.



Miralem PJANIC

Juventus (Ita) & Bosnia

Brilliant playmaker who has been compared to Andrea Pirlo. Capped at youth level by Luxembourg after his family fled the war in the former Yugoslavia.

Marvin PLATTENHARDT

Hertha Berlin & Germany

New Entry Left-back and dead-ball expert. Called up by Germany for the Confederations Cup. Extended his Hertha contract last year amid transfer talk.

Paul POGBA

Manchester United (Eng) & France

Struggled to live up to his star billing this season, with rumours of a rift with Jose Mourinho and despite no longer carrying the burden of being the world's most expensive player.

Ivelin POPOV

Spartak Moscow & Bulgaria

Attacking midfielder or winger who recently moved to Rubin Kazan on loan from Spartak. Voted Bulgaria's footballer of the year for the third season running.

Alejandro POZUELO

Genk (Blg) & Spain

One-time Swansea City midfielder who has thrived in Belgium since joining Genk in 2015. Extended his contract until 2021 amid talk of a transfer to the Bundesliga.

Lucas PRATTO

River Plate & Argentina

Bulky centre-forward who was involved in World Cup qualifying. A move to River after three years in Brazil may give him a platform to secure his place in Russia.

Ayrton PRECIADO

Emelec & Ecuador

New Entry The most decisive player in Ecuadorian football last year. A quick, strong 23-year-old attacker who can cut in from wide or operate up front.

Aleksandr PRIJOVIC

PAOK (Gre) & Serbia

New Entry Top scorer in the Greek league this season following a move from Legia Warsaw. Played for Switzerland at youth level.

Christian PULISIC

Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & USA

Still only 19 but is already starring for Dortmund and has the potential to become the first American superstar to succeed in European club football.

Ricardo QUARESMA

Besiktas (Tur) & Portugal

Enigmatic winger whose career is currently enjoying a renaissance. A Turkish league winner last year, 12 months after Portugal's Euro 2016 triumph.

Juan Fernando QUINTERO

Porto (Por) & Colombia

Wonderfully talented left-footed playmaker whose career ran aground after scoring in the last World Cup. Now playing on loan at River Plate.

Adrien RABIOT

Paris Saint-Germain & France

New Entry A rare Paris-raised talent in the PSG first team. Recently complained that Neymar and Kylian Mbappe received "special privileges" at the club.

Stefan RADU

Lazio (Ita) & Romania

New Entry Has been a solid performer at left-back for Lazio for almost a decade. Quit the Romanian national team in 2013 in order to concentrate on his club career.

Ivan RAKITIC

Barcelona (Spa) & Croatia

The 30-year-old has already played more than 200 times for Barca since his 2014 move from Sevilla. Expected to play a key role for Croatia at the World Cup.

Sergio RAMOS

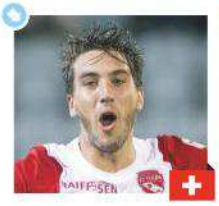
Real Madrid & Spain

The captain of Real Madrid, he is now in his 13th season at the club. Scorer of crucial goals but also collector of red cards, having picked up a record 24 in La Liga.

RAPHINHA

Vitoria Guimaraes (Por) & Brazil

New Entry Left-winger enjoying an outstanding season as the top-scoring midfielder in the Portuguese league. Set to join Sporting.



Simone RAPP

Thun & Switzerland

New Entry Centre-forward who is still managing to score goals despite his side's relegation worries in the Swiss top flight. Can also play on the left side of midfield.

Marcus RASHFORD

Manchester United & England

Manchester-born striker who has lacked first-team opportunities since Romelu Lukaku's arrival at Old Trafford but is likely to be a key figure for England at the World Cup.

Konstantin RAUSCH

Dynamo Moscow & Russia

New Entry Left-sided midfielder who was born in Russia but raised in Germany, for whom he played up until under-21 level. Made his senior debut for Russia in 2017.

Tore REGINIUSSEN

Rosenborg & Norway

New Entry Stalwart centre-back of Norwegian champions Rosenborg. Voted the best player in the Norwegian league in 2017. Can also play in central midfield.

Panagiotis RETSOS

Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) & Greece

New Entry South African-born, he cost Leverkusen £20m from Olympiakos last year. Impressed as a regular in the first half of the Bundesliga.

Marco REUS

Borussia Dortmund & Germany

Talented attacker who has been troubled by injuries – he missed Germany's 2014 World Cup triumph – but has returned in 2018 to something like his best.

Diego REYES

Porto (Por) & Mexico

Centre-back or defensive midfielder who is back in Portugal after productive loan spells in Spain. A regular in the World Cup qualifiers for Mexico.

Kaveh REZAEI

Charleroi (Blg) & Iran

New Entry Striker who has enjoyed an exceptional first season in Europe, helping Charleroi into the championship play-offs and being recalled by Iran.

Franck RIBERY

Bayern Munich (Ger) & France

Veteran wide man who is out of contract at the end of the season, but whose form has prompted talk of Bayern offering the 34-year-old a contract extension.

RICARDO Pereira

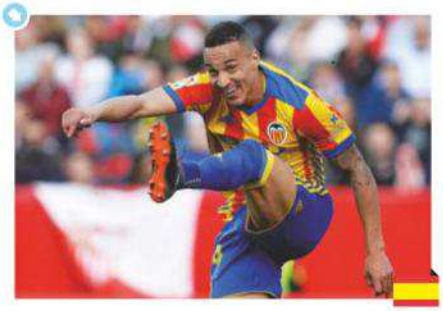
Porto & Portugal

New Entry Right-back who is now Porto's first choice after a successful loan at Nice. Considered by Tottenham as a replacement for Kyle Walker last summer.

Arjen ROBBEN

Bayern Munich (Ger) & Holland

Wide man who has retired from international duty but still has plenty to offer at club level. The 34-year-old is out of contract at the season's end.



RODRIGO

Valencia & Spain

New Entry Mobile striker who is thriving in his fourth season at Mestalla, and his goals have played him into contention for a place in Spain's World Cup squad.

Cristian RODRIGUEZ

Penarol & Uruguay

Stocky, crafty left-footed attacking midfielder with over 100 international caps who returned to his first club in 2017 after a 12-year absence.

James RODRIGUEZ

Real Madrid (Spa) & Colombia

One of the stars of the 2014 World Cup, his form dipped in Madrid but has revived on loan this season at Bayern Munich, who have a £40m option to buy him.

Lucas RODRIGUEZ

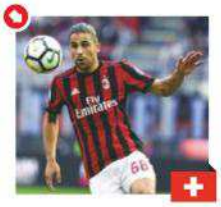
Estudiantes & Argentina

New Entry Little attacker with an electrifying burst of acceleration who is taking on increased responsibility on the ball. Could this be his breakthrough season?

Maxi RODRIGUEZ

Penarol (Uru) & Argentina

Veteran Argentina international who moved to Uruguay last year. Always a versatile figure, he now brings his experience to bear in a more conservative central role.



Ricardo RODRIGUEZ

Milan (Ita) & Switzerland

New Entry Left-back and set-piece specialist who will be a key man for the Swiss at the World Cup. Moved to Milan from Wolfsburg last year.

RODRIGUINHO

Corinthians & Brazil

New Entry A late developer, this busy little midfielder was the dynamic, beating heart of his club's league title win last year. Also deployed as a false nine.

Rodrigo ROJAS

Cerro Porteno & Paraguay

New Entry Captain of Paraguay's league champions. Combines tough marking with forays into the penalty box. A regular choice as the country's player of the year.

Cristiano RONALDO

Real Madrid (Spa) & Portugal

The 34-year-old reigning World Player of the Year has enjoyed a spectacular start to 2018, with a goal spree forcing Madrid to contemplate extending his contract.

Florian THAUVIN

Marseille & France

A key driver in Marseille's impressive domestic campaign, his form has doubtless caused raised eyebrows, given his history. But the player himself was always convinced that he would succeed in his second spell at the club.

"I failed during the first time I was here and I failed for a second time at Newcastle United," he says with refreshing honesty. "So when I came back to Marseille I knew that I couldn't hide any more. So I changed the way I prepared for a match, both physically and mentally, and I'm not the same player I once was."

There have never been any concerns about the natural ability of a player who made his debut in Ligue 2 with Grenoble in March 2011. His talent quickly brought him to the attention of Bastia, who he helped to win the second-tier title and promotion to Ligue 1 in his first season. But even better was to come as he imposed himself in the French top flight the following term, being voted Young Player Of The Year ahead of such as Marco Verratti, Lucas Digne and Remy Cabella. In January 2013 he signed a four-year deal with Lille but was immediately loaned back to Bastia to conclude the campaign.

The departure of Lille coach Rudi Garcia in June 2013 convinced the player that the club he had joined was no longer for him and he refused to train, forcing a move to Marseille on a five-year deal in September 2013 without playing a competitive match for LOSC – an incident that made some view him as a spoilt brat.

Two years later, after an inconsistent time on the French south coast, he was sold to Newcastle, where he failed to impress and was loaned back to Marseille six months later.

It was a risky move for both parties, but the 2016-17 campaign finally saw him add consistency to his potential and he was rewarded in March last year with a call-up to the French national team, finally making his full international debut against Paraguay in June. Seven days later he signed a permanent deal with Marseille for a second time.

Reunited with coach Garcia, his form this season has been nothing less than sensational, even outshining Dimitri Payet, and he says: "A lot of people warned me off re-signing for Marseille, but I knew I would succeed here this time around. I know that my style of play comes with risks attached to it, but I'm trying to get the balance right and I know I can still improve."

All eyes are now on national coach Didier Deschamps to see whether he picks one of Ligue 1's top performers for Russia.

"It's my dream," says Thauvin. "But if I start fixating on the World Cup I'll start forcing things on the pitch and that won't help. Right now I'm just concentrating on doing the best I can."

Howard Johnson

Valentin RONGIER

Nantes & France

New Entry Defensive midfielder who has recovered from a serious knee injury to become a prize asset at Nantes. Regularly tops the stats tables for completed tackles in Ligue 1.

Jerome ROUSSILLON

Montpellier & France

New Entry Left-back who has been a solid performer for Montpellier for the past three seasons having come through the ranks at Sochaux. Linked with a move to England.

Sebastian RUDY

Bayern Munich & Germany

The versatile central midfielder has settled in seamlessly at Bayern after his Bosman move last summer from Hoffenheim. Can also play at full-back.

Raul RUIDIAZ

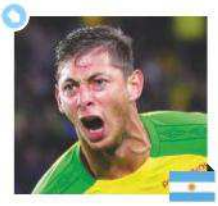
Morelia (Mex) & Peru

New Entry Diminutive striker who is on a hot streak at Mexican club Morelia, where he moved permanently last summer following a successful loan.

Bryan RUIZ

Sporting (Por) & Costa Rica

New Entry Left-sided attacker with limited games at Sporting this season. Will captain his country at the World Cup.



Emiliano SALA

Nantes (Fra) & Argentina

Tall centre-forward who has continued a fine scoring streak this season, helping Nantes into the top five.

PROFILED
Marcel SABITZER
ON PAGE 57

Mohamed SALAH

Liverpool (Eng) & Egypt

The reigning African Footballer of the Year has smashed scoring records at Liverpool since his summer mover from Roma and will lead Egypt's World Cup challenge.

Alexis SANCHEZ

Manchester United (Eng) & Chile

Swapped one failed Champions League campaign for another with his switch from Arsenal to United, whose formation has done him no favours.

Viktor TSYHANKOV

Dynamo Kiev & Ukraine

New Entry If he was still alive today, the late Dynamo Kiev and USSR coach Valeriy Lobanovskyi would surely give his approval to the up-and-coming wide man whom many in Ukraine see as a future international A-lister.

Dour and stern, Lobanovskyi was never one to rip off the mask and reveal his emotions, yet even he might have cracked a heavenly smile on seeing how the 20-year-old goes about his business and embodies all the key tenets of the old maestro's philosophy: pace, finesse, intelligence, clever movement and inner drive.

Now in his second season as a first-team regular with Dynamo, he is a 90-minute threat to opposition defences. With two good feet, he devours open spaces, and is nimble and assured in his link-up play. He specialises in making late, undetected runs, scavenging for goalscoring profit and is invariably on hand to take advantage of a loose ball or rebound off the keeper.

Another of his assets is his versatility. Although he prefers cutting in from the right onto his stronger left foot, he is no slouch on the opposite flank either, and in the not-too-distant future he may well develop into a thoughtful central playmaker, the individual who sets the tempo and picks out the killer pass.

For the moment, though, his starting position is on the wing, and it is in that role that he has enjoyed considerable success for the past two seasons, showing up well in last term's Champions League – appearing in all six of his side's games and scoring in the 1-1 draw in Besiktas – and making his international debut for Ukraine in November 2016 against Finland.

Equally productive this season in the Ukrainian championship and Europa League, it has now become clear why the Dynamo board were so relaxed about selling star wide-man Andriy Yarmolenko to Borussia Dortmund last summer.

Born in Israel, where his father, Vitaliy, played in goal for Hapoel Tayibe, the youngster began his footballing journey with the schoolboys and juniors at Vinnytsia, a city 180 miles from Kiev. Considered one of the most promising players of his generation, he had both Shakhtar Donetsk and Dynamo beating a path to his door, but as a boyhood fan he only had eyes for the White and Blues and joined them at the age of 14.

Six years on, the love affair is still going strong.

Nick Bidwell

Carlos SANCHEZ

Fiorentina (Ita) & Colombia

New Entry Man marker whose positional sense and tackling give Colombia's midfield strength and balance. Moved on loan to Espanyol in January.

Davinson SANCHEZ

Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Colombia

Has quickly settled at Spurs after last year's move from Ajax and has a promising partnership for Colombia with Yerry Mina.

Jadon SANCHO

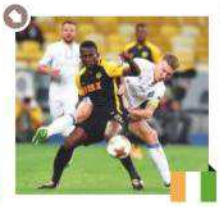
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & England

New Entry Teenager who left Manchester City last summer in search of first-team football. Part of England's world under-17 triumph.

Leroy SANE

Manchester City (Eng) & Germany

Speedy winger who has gone from strength to strength under Pep Guardiola. One of many attacking options open to Joachim Low.



Sekou SANOGO

Young Boys (Swi) & Ivory Coast

New Entry Defensive midfielder and one of the key figures in the incredible displacement of Basle in the Swiss league by Young Boys. Tipped to move on this summer.

Morgan SANSON

Marseille & France

Former under-21 midfielder providing plenty of assists and goals for Marseille, who paid Montpellier £8m in January 2017. Lots of interest from English clubs.

Ismaila SARR

Rennes (Fra) & Senegal

New Entry Still just 20, he reportedly turned down Barcelona to join Rennes from Metz last summer, claiming it was too early for such a move.

SAUL Niguez

Atletico Madrid & Spain

Talented central midfielder who was the top scorer at last summer's under-21 Euro Championship. The subject of interest from Barcelona and Manchester United.

Patrik SCHICK

Sampdoria (Ita) & Czech Republic

On loan at Roma as part of a complex deal involving an initial loan fee of £8m and a final cost of up to £38m. Progress has stalled after an exciting start.

Kasper SCHMEICHEL

Leicester City (Eng) & Denmark

A crucial figure in Leicester's shock Premier League win in 2016. The former Manchester City trainee is Denmark's first choice.

Stephan SCHROCK

Ceres-Negros & Philippines

New Entry Former Bundesliga midfielder who played a leading role in Ceres-Negros becoming the first-ever ASEAN zone champions of the AFC Cup last year.

Stefan SCHWAB

Rapid Vienna & Austria

New Entry The most impressive performer in the Austrian League this season. Captain and midfield beating heart of Rapid. At 27, the classic late-developer.

SERGI Roberto

Barcelona & Spain

Versatile academy graduate established as Barcelona's first-choice right-back and recently agreed a new contract with a reported €500m buyout clause.

Jean Michael SERI

Nice (Fra) & Ivory Coast

Dynamic midfield all-rounder with a clever passing range. Almost joined Barcelona last year but a fee could not be agreed. Set to move on this summer.

Xherdan SHAQIRI

Stoke City (Eng) & Switzerland

Clever attacker who has been the bright spark in Stoke's poor season. Only 26 but already has more than 60 Swiss caps. Born in the former Yugoslavia to Kosovar Albanians.

SHIKABALA

Zamalek & Egypt

New Entry Mercurial talent who recently earned a recall to the Egyptian national team ahead of the World Cup. Currently playing on loan at Saudi club Al Raed.

Djibril SIDIBE

Monaco & France

New Entry Marauding right-back whose attacking qualities more than compensate for defensive faults. Could be sold this summer if the price is right.

Gylfi SIGURDSSON

Everton (Eng) & Iceland

Free-kick specialist and key figure behind Iceland's World Cup qualification. Cost Everton £45m from Swansea last summer. Injury threatens his place in Russia.

Andre SILVA

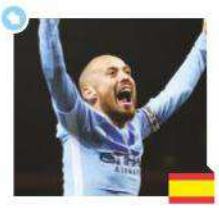
Milan (Ita) & Portugal

The lead striker in Portugal's World Cup qualifying campaign cost Milan €38m from Porto last summer but he had to wait until March 2018 to score his first Serie A goal.

Bernardo SILVA

Manchester City (Eng) & Portugal

Clever winger who cost City £43.5m. Missed Portugal's Euro 2016 triumph through injury but bounced back to star for Monaco last year.



David SILVA

Manchester City (Eng) & Spain

A brilliantly vital but under-rated creative figure for both City and Spain. Born in the Canary Islands, he came through Valencia's youth system.

Pione SISTO

Celta Vigo (Spa) & Denmark

New Entry Ugandan-born winger with explosive pace. Moved to Denmark aged two and made his breakthrough at Midtjylland before a move to Spain.

Milan SKRINIAR

Internazionale (Ita) & Slovakia

New Entry Arguably been the best centre-back in Serie A this season, he has earned rave reviews since a €20m move from Sampdoria last summer.

Martin SMEDBERG-DALENCE

Bolivar & Bolivia

New Entry Born in Sweden to a Bolivian father and capped by Bolivia in 2014 after representing Sweden at youth level. Fine striker of the ball.

Fedor SMOLOV

Krasnodar & Russia

New Entry Striker who was the Russian Premier League's top scorer in 2016 and 2017 but has not managed to reproduce his club form at international level.

SON Heung-min

Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & South Korea

The most successful Korean player in Europe. Flying for Spurs this season after taking time to settle in England following a move from Leverkusen.

Yeferson SOTELDO

Universidad de Chile (Chl) & Venezuela

Tiny, squat and extravagantly skilled attacking midfielder, who recently moved from Huachipato to one of Chile's biggest clubs.

Renato STEFFEN

Wolfsburg (Ger) & Switzerland

New Entry Left winger who made the switch to the Bundesliga in January from Basle after impressing in the Champions League for the Swiss side.

Raheem STERLING

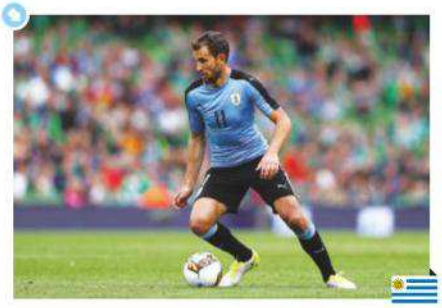
Manchester City & England

Pacy Jamaican-born winger who will be one of England's main attacking threats at the World Cup. Another who is thriving in Pep Guardiola's attack-minded City team.

Vladimir STOJKOVIC

Partizan & Serbia

New Entry Much-travelled keeper now back in Belgrade after spells across Europe. Made crucial saves in Serbia's World Cup qualifying campaign.



Cristhian STUANI

Girona (Spa) & Uruguay

New Entry Uruguayan forward who experienced promotion and relegation with Middlesbrough but is now soaring again with Girona's surprising rise in La Liga.

Luis SUAREZ

Barcelona (Spa) & Uruguay

Often overlooked in the to rush to praise Lionel Messi, but he continues to score prolifically for Barcelona, with 21 Liga goals by the middle of March.

Danijel SUBASIC

Monaco (Fra) & Croatia

Stalwart keeper who has been at Monaco since 2012. The 33-year-old has signed a new deal that could keep him at the club until the end of his playing career.

Niklas SULE

Bayern Munich & Germany

New Entry Giant centre-back who has proved a valuable back-up at Bayern since moving to Munich from Hoffenheim in the summer.

Dusan TADIC

Southampton (Eng) & Serbia

New Entry Left-sided midfielder who has suffered a poor season with Southampton but will still be expected to be Serbia's main creative influence at the World Cup.

Jonathan TAH

Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

Defensive rock for Leverkusen, he was Hamburg's youngest Bundesliga debutant at 17. Called-up to the Euro 2016 squad. Has a German mother and Ivorian father.

TALISCA

Benfica (Por) & Brazil

The Brazilian attacker's two-year successful loan at Turkish champions Besiktas is set to end this summer. Benfica are reported to be keen to cash in.

Mehdi TAREMI

Al Gharafa (Qat) & Iran

New Entry A key figure in Iran's World Cup qualifying campaign, scoring crucial goals despite facing criticism at home for a lack of big-match experience.

Percy TAU

Mamelodi Sundowns & South Africa

The star of Mamelodi Sundowns' 2016 African Champions League triumph is attracting a lot of interest from Europe and could leave South Africa this summer.

Alex TELLES

Porto (Por) & Brazil

New Entry Attacking left-back who could be the next big-money departure from Porto, with a number of English club tracking his progress. Yet to be capped by Brazil.

Marc-Andre TER STEGEN

Barcelona (Spa) & Germany

Now undisputed first-choice keeper at Barca. The 25-year-old is seen as the long-term replacement for Manuel Neuer as German number one.

Martin TERRIER

Lyon & France

New Entry In-form 21-year-old who is a winger or second striker. Currently on loan at Strasbourg.

THIAGO Alcantara

Bayern Munich (Ger) & Spain

Hugely gifted playmaker who has had bad luck with injuries.

PROFILED CARLOS TEVEZ ON PAGE 58

THIAGO SILVA

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Brazil

Solid centre-back who missed the 2014 World Cup semi-final through suspension.

PROFILED FLORIAN THAUVIN ON PAGE 61

Lars STINDL

Borussia Monchengladbach & Germany

His goals for Gladbach earned a Germany debut last year, later becoming one of his country's heroes at the Confederations Cup in Russia.

SUSO

Milan (Ita) & Spain

New Entry Attacking midfielder who failed to break through at Liverpool after moving there as a 17-year-old. Now enjoying life in Serie A, scoring spectacular goals.

Djaniny TAVARES

Santos Laguna (Mex) & Cape Verde

New Entry Tall striker who made the switch from the Portuguese league to Mexico in 2014 and has thrived there. Currently the Liga MX's top scorer.

Youri TIELEMANS

Monaco (Fra) & Belgium

New Entry Central midfielder who was the outstanding player in the Belgian league last season for Anderlecht, earning a summer move to Monaco.

Mark UTH

Hoffenheim & Germany

Hoffenheim's fast-improving 26-year-old striker is one of a rare breed: a German player who had to venture abroad for his big break.

Despite scoring goals a plenty for the Cologne youth team – his hometown club – he never went beyond training sessions with the first team and in 2012, aged 20, was forced to beat a retreat to Holland where, slowly but surely, he managed to turn the tide, excelling for Heerenveen reserves, then their senior side and out on loan at Heracles.

Three years later he would return to his native land, recruited by top-flight Hoffenheim in a €2.2million deal. But true to the theme of the vast bulk of his sporting life, would have to scrap for reward, spending his first two years as the team's resident supersub and only becoming an automatic pick at the start of the current campaign

For most top players, there is moment in time when everything comes together, when all the stars align, and that is this season for Uth. His confidence boosted by his new-found role of starter, he has led the Hoffenheim line with verve and presence, given a finishing masterclass with either foot, and has proved a man for the big occasion, on the score-sheet against all the domestic heavyweights: Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund and RB Leipzig.

His two goals in his side's 2-0 home victory over Bayern in September were classic examples of his potency in the box. Racing through to smash home after a quick throw-in caught Bayern sleeping, then repeating the dose, clinically sweeping in a Stephen Zubar cutback.

"When it comes to putting the ball in the net, Mark has to be among to be among the top five in the Bundesliga," says Hoffenheim coach Julian Nagelsmann. "Uth is an outstanding forward," adds team-mate and playmaker Kerem Demirbay. "He makes goals out of nothing."

In no way, though, is he purely a converter of chances. He has no problem holding the ball up and bringing others into play, is mobile and busy, and can cause a great deal of damage with raking runs from deep.

At the end of the season he will be bidding farewell to the *Hoffenheimer*. Keen for a change of scenery, he is due to join Schalke in the summer on a Bosman free. The Cologne reject appears to be having the last laugh.

Nick Bidwell

VINICIUS JUNIOR

Flamengo & Brazil

Few 16-year-olds have made their senior debut carrying a heavier burden of expectation than Vinicius Jose Paixao de Oliveira Junior.

Last May, two months short of his 17th birthday, he was on the bench for Flamengo's opening game of the league championship at home to Atletico Mineiro, and when the teams were announced his name drew the loudest cheer from a crowd of over 42,000.

The public were desperate to see him – a little bit as a result of earlier displays in the South American Under-17 Championship, but mainly because he had agreed to join Real Madrid for around £40million, which is an extraordinary amount to pay for a totally unproven talent, however promising.

Introduced for the last 10 minutes, with the match level at 1-1, he was unable to influence the result and even heard his first boos at senior level. Cutting in from wide on the left, he showed the confidence to run through a repertoire of tricks – but none of them worked, and he gave the impression more of a ballboy providing half time entertainment than a top-class footballer.

Almost a year later, he is now far more prepared for his second shot at the Brazilian championship before Real take him across the Atlantic once he turns 18.

Although his decision making is often flawed, and he is prone to charging around in too much of a rush, his ability is unquestionable. His pace running with the ball is intimidating, and though he favours moving onto to his right foot he can put doubt in the mind of the defender by going outside on his left. And he is also developing a penalty-area presence, totting up the goals in the early season Rio State Championship.

The question now is should he stay an extra year at Flamengo, where he is getting regular opportunities, or would his decision making be better improved by joining Real Madrid as soon as possible?

Either way, Fla fans should enjoy him – and, at times, even enjoy being frustrated by him – while they can, because sooner or later he will be one more footballing attraction they will only be able to appreciate on television.

Tim Vickery

Ola TOIVONEN

Toulouse (Fra) & Sweden

New Entry Mainstay of Sweden's national side in the World Cup qualifiers – in which he scored with a dramatic 50-yard shot over France keeper Hugo Lloris.

Karl TOKO EKAMBI

Angers (Fra) & Cameroon

New Entry Striker whose goals have helped Angers battle against relegation from Ligue 1 this season. Linked with a number of Premier League clubs.

Corentin TOLISSO

Bayern Munich (Ger) & France

Midfielder whose performances for Lyon last season played him into the senior France squad and persuaded the German champions to pay in excess of €40m.

Macnelly TORRES

Atletico Nacional & Colombia

An old-fashioned number 10 who possesses the glorious ability to split the opposing defence apart with immaculately weighted through passes.

Roman TORRES

Seattle Sounders (USA) & Panama

New Entry Powerful, stocky central defender whose dramatic late winner secured Panama's qualification for the World Cup.

Zoran TOSIC

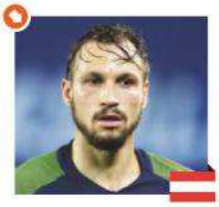
Partizan & Serbia

New Entry Mercurial left-winger now back at Partizan. Failed to become a regular at Manchester United but enjoyed great success at CSKA Moscow, with three league titles.

Adrien TREBEL

Anderlecht (Blg) & France

New Entry Frenchman who has been one of the top performers in the Belgian league. Joined Anderlecht from Standard Liege in January 2017.

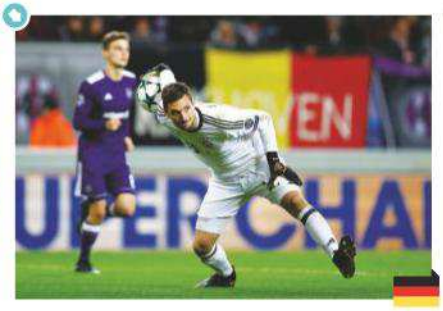


Andreas ULMER

Red Bull Salzburg & Austria

New Entry Veteran left-back in fine form for champions and current league leaders Salzburg.

PROFILED VIKTOR TSYHANKOV ON PAGE 62



Sven ULREICH

Bayern Munich & Germany

New Entry The former Stuttgart keeper has emerged from Manuel Neuer's shadow, covering for the injured number one with aplomb and earning calls for a World Cup selection.

Samuel UMTITI

Barcelona (Spa) & France

Cameroon-born centre-back who has continued his rapid career ascent this season, settling well in La Liga to become Barcelona's outstanding defender.

Dayot UPAMECANO

RB Leipzig (Ger) & France

New Entry Only 19 but has great composure and power. A Red Bull find, first at Salzburg and now Leipzig.

VAGNER LOVE

Besiktas (Tur) & Brazil

New Entry The veteran is enjoying a late-career flourish in Turkey, where he was top scorer last season.

PROFILED MARK UTH ON PAGE 65

Jaime VALDES

Colo Colo & Chile

Veteran who returned home in 2014 after almost a decade and a half in Italy. Even at 37 his shrewd use of the ball continues to make him a stand-out performer.

Jorge VALDIVIA

Colo Colo & Chile

Twinkle-toed playmaker whose rebellious spirit has made him the *enfant terrible* of Chilean football. Now back home after over a decade away.

Diego VALERI

Portland Timbers (USA) & Argentina

New Entry Goalscoring midfielder voted Major League Soccer's MVP last season for his performances with Portland.

Donny VAN DE BEEK

Ajax & Holland

New Entry Central midfielder who has emerged as a key figure in Amsterdam this past year, weighing in with goals and assists, and earning a first Holland cap.

Virgil VAN DIJK

Liverpool (Eng) & Holland

New Entry Liverpool's record signing and at £75m the world's most expensive defender. Not yet a Holland regular despite strong club performances.

Hans VANAKEN

Club Brugge & Belgium

New Entry Attacking midfielder who has excelled at Club Brugge since a 2015 move from Lokeren. The 25-year-old is strong in the air with a good passing range.

Raphael VARANE

Real Madrid (Spa) & France

One of the world's most accomplished defenders. Turns 25 in April but already in his seventh season at Real Madrid and with 40 caps for France.

Jamie VARDY

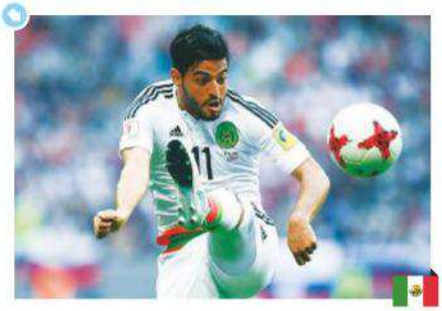
Leicester City & England

Direct, speedy finisher who dropped into non-league for nine seasons after being rejected by Sheffield Wednesday at 16. Joined Championship side Leicester in 2012.

Eduardo VARGAS

Tigres (Mex) & Chile

Much-travelled striker who has found success in Mexico after struggling in Europe. Tournament joint-top scorer when hosts Chile won the 2015 Copa America.



Carlos VELA

Los Angeles FC (USA) & Mexico

One-time Arsenal prospect who was the big-name signing for newly-launched MLS side Los Angeles. At 29, back in favour with the Mexican national side.

Marco VERRATTI

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Italy

Deep-lying playmaker who joined PSG as a teenage prospect from Pescara. Clever ball player but criticised for temperamental lapses during games.

Jan VERTONGHEN

Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Belgium

Centre-back who is just as comfortable slotting in at left-back. Playing his best football for Spurs despite injury problems. Joined from Ajax six years ago.

Arturo VIDAL

Bayern Munich (Ger) & Chile

Highly competitive "warrior" who is out of contract at Bayern next year, prompting speculation about a possible move away from the Bundesliga this summer.

David VILLA

New York City (USA) & Spain

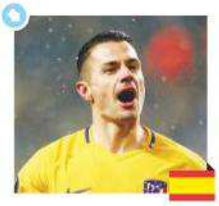
Veteran striker who is "fighting retirement" as he begins his fourth season in Major League Soccer.

Edin VISCA

Istanbul BB (Tur) & Bosnia

New Entry Winger at Istanbul BB since 2011, winning promotion and leading the current surprise title challenge.

PROFILED
VINICIUS JUNIOR
ON PAGE 66



VITOLO

Atletico Madrid & Spain

Attacker sent on loan to Las Palmas to help get around a transfer ban, but made his debut for his new club in January. A strong contender for Spain's World Cup squad

Ruud VORMER

Club Brugge (Blg) & Holland

Dutchman who continues to impress with his performances for Club Brugge in the Belgian league, leading to plenty of interest from big foreign clubs.

Sandro WAGNER

Bayern Munich & Germany

Back at Bayern a decade after leaving having failed to break through as a teenager. Tall striker who gives Bayern a viable alternative to Lewandowski.

Kyle WALKER

Manchester City & England

Attacking right-back who became the most expensive English footballer of all time when signed by City from Tottenham Hotspur for £53m last summer.

Julian WEIGL

Borussia Dortmund & Germany

Defensive midfielder and the embodiment of Dortmund's policy of promoting youth. Only 22 but already a vital figure in maintaining the rhythm of Dortmund's midfield.

Timo WERNER

RB Leipzig & Germany

Centre-forward who has emerged at Leipzig to become a senior Germany international. Was the top scorer at last year's Confederations Cup.

Inaki WILLIAMS

Athletic Bilbao & Spain

One of the fastest players in La Liga. Born in Bilbao to a Ghanaian father and Liberian mother, he is Athletic's first black player. Contract has an €80m buyout clause.

WILLIAN

Chelsea (Eng) & Brazil

Winger or attacking midfielder who has been Chelsea's best performer in a disappointing season. Likely to feature for Brazil at the World Cup in Russia.

Axel WITSEL

Tianjin Quinjian (Chn) & Belgium

New Entry Continues to be picked for the Belgian national side despite a move to China.

WU Lei

Shanghai SIPG & China

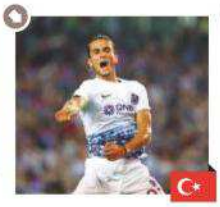
The leading Chinese player in the domestic Super League. Now 26, he made his debut aged 14.

PROFILED MARIUS WOLF ON PAGE 69

Hotaru YAMAGUCHI

Cerezo Osaka & Japan

New Entry The key holding midfielder for the Japanese national side. He was the captain of Cerezo when they won the Emperor's Cup and J.League Cup.



Yusuf YAZICI

Trabzonspor & Turkey

New Entry One of the bright new stars of Turkish football. Linked with a number of foreign clubs after making his first appearance for the senior Turkey side.

Maya YOSHIDA

Southampton (Eng) & Japan

Centre-back who is not having the best of seasons at a struggling Southampton but is an automatic choice for the Japan side at this summer's World Cup.

Marius WOLF

Eintracht Frankfurt & Germany

New Entry On examining the career path of the livewire Eintracht Frankfurt wide-man Marius Wolf, one life lesson springs to mind: never give up.

Only 14 months ago, Wolf was rotting in the amateur ranks at Hanover; frozen out, disgruntled and wondering where it had all gone wrong. But he ploughed on nevertheless and since joining Eintracht early in 2017 – initially on loan, then permanently – has undergone the most incredible of transformations. From fourth-tier nobody to Bundesliga star.

From zero-rated to total respect in an instant.

"I saw this move to Frankfurt as my last to chance to make it as a Bundesliga player," says the 22-year-old.

"I felt I absolutely has to make the most of it, to give my all. And it's paid off. It was my good luck to have been taken on by Eintracht."

A vital figure in Eintracht's surprise challenge for Champions League qualification this season, the 22-year-old very much epitomises the hard-boiled essence of the Frankfurter Class of 2017-18. He is gritty, he is determined, he never stops running - frequently clocking up some 12 km per game - and whatever the score, will go through the pain barrier to make things happen.

"'Wolfi' is the type of player who can be relied upon for maximum effort," gushes Eintracht coach Niko Kovac. "He plays with passion, bite and heart."

In an Eintracht XI which is extremely well-drilled and solid, Wolf has emerged as their X-factor. With with his pace, quick feet, persistence and creativity, he swiftly can turn an open play turnover into a cash pay-out, hits a mean long-range shot and delivers a wonderfully accurate set-piece.

He is adaptable too. This term alone, he has lined up on the right wing, the right side of midfield, as a second striker and an emergency right-back, filling in superbly when the American Timothy Chandler was out injured.

All that matters to him is that he plays and that he wins.

"If Wolf doesn't eventually become a German national team player, I'll give up the game," promised Eintracht midfielder Kevin-Prince Boateng in a recent interview with *Kicker* magazine. "In the Bundesliga, there's no one better in his age group.

"It's not normal for someone to be so calm and focused. These are exactly the qualities which will make him an international in the long term. He knows what he has to do to get ahead and every day, he's working on his physique. He never stops."

A native of the Bavarian town of Coburg, Wolf came through the youth systems at Nuremberg and 1860 Munich. Indeed, he used to be the captain of the latter's youth team.

Nick Bidwell

Wilfred ZAHA

Crystal Palace (Eng) & Ivory Coast

Tricky winger who opted to play for Ivory Coast after becoming frustrated with a lack of opportunities with Gareth Southgate's England squad.

Eran ZAHAVI

Guangzhou R&F (Chn) & Israel

New Entry Attacker who is one of the less well-known foreign players in the Chinese Super League but has been one of the most successful, with plenty of goals for Guangzhou R&F.

Andre-Frank ZAMBO ANGUISSA

Marseille (Fra) & Cameroon

New Entry One of the most improved players in Ligue 1, earning praise for his efforts from fans who had questioned his technical abilities.

Duvan ZAPATA

Napoli (Ita) & Colombia

New Entry Striker who is thriving on loan at Sampdoria this season, scoring a stunning solo goal against Udinese that evoked memories of George Weah.

Simone ZAZA

Valencia (Spa) & Italy

New Entry Centre-forward who has played a full role in Valencia's success this season, banishing memories of his frustrating spell at West Ham.

Piotr ZIELINSKI

Napoli (Ita) & Poland

Midfield playmaker who has thrived under the guidance of Maurizio Sarri at Empoli and now Napoli. Ever present for Poland in the World Cup qualifiers.

Hakim ZIYECH

Ajax (Hol) & Morocco

Winger and free-kick wizard. Born in Holland and played for the country's under-21s but opted to play for Morocco. Joined Ajax from Twente in 2016.

Szymon ZURKOWSKI

Gornik Zabrze & Poland

New Entry Exciting 20-year-old who has earned rave reviews since his debut for Gornik two years ago. Linked with a move to Italy's Serie A.

Glenn Moore

Numbers down for new season

NWSL to kick off with only nine teams

Potential... Mallory Pugh (in red)

A year ago the mood music sound-tracking the National Women's Soccer League was upbeat. Not only was the league entering its fifth season – a record for a professional women's competition in the USA – but a ground-breaking three-year TV deal had also been agreed.

Even though the champion franchise, New York Western Flash, had moved 650 miles to become North Carolina Courage, the league appeared stable and there was excited talk of expansion. But that optimism has dissipated.

Courage have been a great success, attracting promising crowds and winning last season's regular campaign before losing to Portland Thorns in the play-off Final. A repeat of that match-up will kick off the second season's live coverage by Lifetime TV which, after some teething problems, is well regarded.

But this season there will be only nine teams after Kansas City and Boston Breakers folded in the winter. Most of the Kansas roster have re-appeared as the core of a new club, Utah Royals, but there were no takers for the Breakers' slot and the team was dispersed, leaving just five of the eight founding sides remaining.

Expansion is still on the agenda though, with Los Angeles and Vancouver mooted as new locations for 2019. Yet equally pertinent is ensuring no more clubs disappear. Some are still struggling to draw viable attendances, and without the US and Canadian federations covering the wages of international players their squads would lack lustre.

There are issues, too, with some of those players, as US internationals are allocated to clubs by US Soccer and NWSL's salary cap means it cannot match the money Europe's best have to offer.

The 2017 Global Sports Salaries Survey ranked NWSL fourth for women's leagues, behind France, Germany and England. Average salaries in NWSL were said to be £20,805 ($27.050), while in France it is £38,282. Europe also offers the Champions League, and while Crystal Dunn left Chelsea to sign for Courage, the English club suspect that she had been put under pressure regarding her international place.

More senior players are less pliable and Morgan Brian left Chicago Red Stars for Lyon, while Christen Press' move from the same club to Houston Dash hit the buffers when the player refused to go. She now appears to be waiting for the transfer window to open before leaving for Europe.

However, there are shafts of hope – and nowhere is anticipation greater than at Sandy City, a few miles south of Salt Lake City, where **Utah Royals** will play.

> Expansion is still on the agenda, with Los Angeles and Vancouver mooted as new locations for 2019

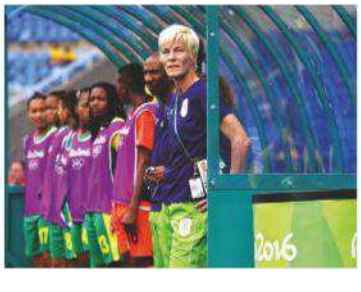
The Royals are part of Real Salt Lake and the MLS club have made it clear that they are to be an equal part. They have already agreed a shirt-sponsorship agreement that owner Dell Loy Hansen claims is "the most lucrative jersey-front deal in American women's soccer history". Conservice, a Utah-based utility company, are thought to be paying $2million over three years.

Utah, who will play at Real Salt Lake's 20,000-capacity soccer-specific arena, sold 2,000 season tickets in their first month. They also made some intriguing signings, notably coach Laura Harvey, previously of Arsenal and Seattle Reign.

Of the former Kansas squad, Sydney Leroux left for Orlando Pride – a switch that enabled her to join up with husband Dom Dwyer, who now plays for Orlando City – but Becky Sauerbrunn, Amy Rodriguez and Desiree Scott moved west. Newly recruited are Scott's Canadian team-mate Diana Matheson, US cap centurion Kelley O'Hara, Norway striker Elise Thorsnes and Australia's Katrina Gorry.

After several seasons as the only female coach, Harvey has been joined by Vera Pauw and Denise Reddy.

Pauw is hugely experienced, having managed the national teams of Scotland, Russia, South Africa and her native Holland. **Houston Dash** is, however, her first club role and she has work to do at a club that has never made the play-offs. She has signed two of her former South Africa players, Thembu Kgatlana and Linda Motihao, and plucked Australia's



Work to do ...Vera Pauw

Newcomers... Utah Royals

Kyah Simon from the Breakers rubble.

Reddy's **Sky Blue** have been the worst-supported team in four of the NWSL's five seasons and only defunct Kansas were below their 2,613 average last year. Nevertheless, attendances have steadily risen in Piscataway and a decent season should stir further interest in the New Jersey outfit.

Washington Spirit fell from second in 2016 to last in 2017 following an exodus of key players amid reports of an unhappy dressing room, but there is promise following the recruitment of rising star Mallory Pugh. The other club that failed to make the play-offs, **Seattle Reign**, are now led by former Kansas coach Vlatko Andonovski in what is effectively a job swap with Harvey.

Having made the play-offs in their third season, **Orlando Pride** are seeking to make the final two. Fellow semi-finalists **Chicago Red Stars** acquired 2017's leading scorer Sam Kerr from Sky Blue and Kiwi Rosie White from Boston.

Chelsea arrival Dunn is Paul Riley's main addition to **North Carolina Courage**, while **Portland Thorns**' star replacement Caitlin Foord was injured playing for Sydney and will miss the opening months of the season, leaving Brazilian midfielder Andressinha as the headline arrival.

The league may only consist of nine clubs, but hopes are high for a season that will get NWSL back on track. WS

Round-up

Mixed fortunes... Phil Neville

PROMISING START FOR NEVILLE

Phil Neville enjoyed a dream debut as England manager, beating France 4-1 in the She Believes Cup, an invitational tournament in the US. England followed that up with a 2-2 draw against Germany, but were then beaten by the tournament-winning hosts.

France recovered from losing to England to hold the USA and beat an out-of-sorts Germany 3-0.

Two other 12-nation tournaments also took place. Spain won the Cyprus Cup, beating Italy 2-0 in the Final, but the Algarve Cup was shared between Sweden and Holland after heavy rain made the Final in Parchal unplayable.

Champions... Melbourne City

CITY HAT-TRICK DOWN UNDER

Melbourne City won the third W-League title of their three-year existence with a 2-0 victory over Sydney in the Grand Final, with Jess Fishlock of Wales and England's Jodie Taylor scoring the goals.

City beat regular-season champions Brisbane Roar in the play-off semi-final in what was a first managerial success for former Leicester, Leeds and Hearts defender Patrick Kisnorbo.

Perth Glory's Sam Kerr was the tournament's top scorer.

DOWIE HEADS TO SCANDINAVIA

England striker Natasha Dowie, a free agent after the collapse of Boston Breakers, signed for Linkoping after a loan spell at Melbourne Victory. Spanish striker Veronica Boquete left Paris Saint-Germain for Beijing BG Phoenix, led by ex-Linkoping coach Kim Bjorkegren.

Return...Cristiane

CRISTIANE RETURNS FOR BRAZIL

Cristiane has rescinded her retirement from international football. The 32-year-old was among several players who quit in September citing a lack of female influence in the Brazilian federation, an issue brought to a head by the firing of coach Emily Lima.

Cristiane, who now plays in China for Changchun Zhuoyue, said there had subsequently been some progress. She wrote on Instagram: "Is it enough? No. It's little, but they're doing it."

The midfielder returns in time for the 2018 Copa America Femenina, in Chile in April, which doubles up as qualification for the 2019 World Cup. Both finalists qualify for France 2019. The third-place team plays off against a CONCACAF nation.

JAPAN DEFEND TITLE IN JORDAN

Japan, Australia and China are favourites to win April's Asian Cup, and take three of the five World Cup qualifying spots up for grabs. Both 2014 finalists, holders Japan and runners-up Australia, have been drawn in group B, alongside South Korea and Vietnam. China, hosts Jordan, Thailand and the Philippines are in group A.

Hopeful...Japan

MISCELLANEOUS

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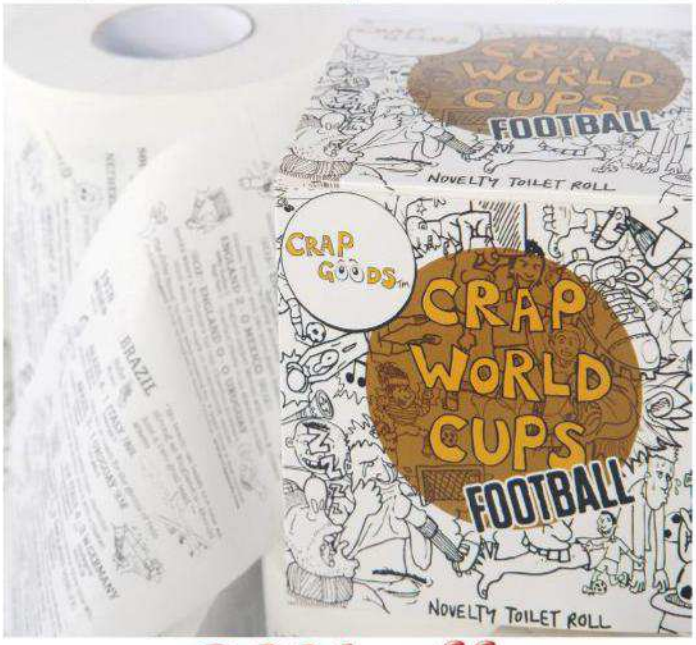

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CSL opener...Henan Jianye's Feng Zhuoyi (left) and Axel Witsel of Tianjin Quanjian

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In front ...Porto's Goncalo Paciencia

FEBRUARY 15-MARCH 12, 2018

Global diary

A comprehensive record of recent events around the world

Thursday February 15

ENGLAND: Four West Bromwich Albion players are interviewed by police after they steal a taxi from outside a fast-food restaurant in Barcelona while on a training trip.
GERMANY: Michy Batshuayi takes his tally to five goals in three games since joining Borussia Dortmund on loan from Chelsea as they come from behind to beat Atalanta 3-2 in the Europa League.
ITALY: On a bad night in Europe for Serie A sides, Napoli lose 3-1 at home to RB Leipzig and Lazio go down 1-0 at Steaua. Milan, however, win 3-0 away to Ludogorets.
SCOTLAND: Alex McLeish agrees to become manager of the national team for a second time.

Friday February 16

ENGLAND: A former assistant to Jose Mourinho at Internazionale, Real Madrid and Chelsea, Jose Morais is appointed manager of Championship side Barnsley.

Saturday February 17

WALES: The First Division game between Port Talbot Town and Taff's Well is temporarily halted following an earthquake in the area. Hosts Port Talbot go on to win 2-1 when the game restarts.

Sunday February 18

ENGLAND: Third-tier Rochdale hold Tottenham Hotspur to a 2-2 draw in the FA Cup.
ITALY: A 1-0 win at home to SPAL gives Napoli a club-record ninth consecutive victory in Serie A.
NIGERIA: Kano Pillars defender Chinedu Udoji dies in a car crash a few hours after playing in a 1-1 draw against his former club Enyimba.

Monday February 19

ENGLAND: Former coach Barry Bennell is sentenced to 30 years in prison for sexually assaulting junior players from Manchester City and Crewe Alexandra. Wigan Athletic beat Man City 1-0 in the FA Cup.

Tuesday February 20

GERMANY: Wolfsburg name Bruno Labbadia as their new coach, less than 24 hours after Martin Schmidt resigns from the post.
SPAIN: After failing to score in eight games against Chelsea, Lionel Messi breaks his duck with Barcelona's equaliser in a 1-1 away draw in the Champions League.

Wednesday February 21

UKRAINE: Shakhtar Donetsk come from behind to beat Roma 2-1 in the home leg of their Champions League round-of-16 tie.

Thursday February 22

ENGLAND: Arsenal lose 2-1 at home to Sweden's Ostersund in the Europa League but go through to the next round 4-2 on aggregate.
SPAIN: Villarreal defender Ruben Semedo appears in court charged with attempted murder. A police officer dies after clashes between fans ahead of Athletic Bilbao's game against Spartak Moscow.

Friday February 23

UKRAINE: Shakhtar Donetsk's Darijo Srna is handed a 17-month doping suspension, but as this is backdated to when the offence took place he will be eligible to play again in August.

Saturday February 24

ENGLAND: Brighton & Hove Albion's Lewis Dunk equals the Premier League record with his fourth own goal of the season as his side beat Swansea City 4-1.
GERMANY: Bayern Munich are denied a club record of 15 straight wins in all competitions as they draw 0-0 with Hertha Berlin.
SPAIN: Luis Suarez scores a hat-trick as Barcelona thrash Girona 6-1 and make it a club record 32 successive La Liga games unbeaten.

Sunday February 25

ENGLAND: Pep Guardiola wins his first silverware as Manchester City manager as they beat Arsenal 3-0 in the League Cup Final.
FRANCE: Neymar leaves the pitch on a stretcher as Paris Saint-Germain beat Marseille 3-0.

Monday February 26

CHILE: Trailing 4-1 with 10 men and just four minutes of normal

Beaten...Roma midfielder Gerson loses out to Marlos (left) and Ivan Ordets of Shakhtar Donetsk in the Champions League

Goals...Michy Batshuayi has made a fine start at Borussia Dortmund

time remaining, Curico Unido come back to draw 4-4 at home to Union Espanola in the Chilean Primera.
JERSEY: UEFA rejects Jersey's bid to become a member state.

Tuesday February 27

ARGENTINA: Lautaro Martinez becomes only the second player – after Guillermo Barros Schelotto in 2003 – to score a hat-trick for an Argentinian club side against a Brazilian one in the Libertadores Cup as Racing beat Cruzeiro 4-2.
SPAIN: Gerard Moreno scores in injury time as Espanyol win 1-0 and beat Real Madrid for the first time in more than a decade.
USA: The North American Soccer League cancels its 2018 season after its second-tier status was revoked in September.

Wednesday February 28

FRANCE: Chambly join fellow third-tier side Les Herbiers in the French Cup semi-finals with ➤

Shock...Chambly's Lassana Doucoure

Dominican Republic

STEVE MENARY

Up close...Cibao's Charles Herold Jnr (right) watches Oswaldo Alanis of Chivas

Island goes from strength to strength

Cibao make history in CONCACAF Champions League

Although the Dominican Republic's first-ever CONCACAF Champions League entrants fell at the first hurdle, Cibao's appearance in the competition was a success in itself.

With the group stage removed and entrants cut from 24 teams to 16, Cibao were drawn against Mexico's Guadalajara. They lost 2-0 at home to the 2017 Liga MX Clausura winners and 5-0 in the return, but the results were not a disgrace for a club that was only founded three years ago.

Based in Santiago de los Caballeros, the country's second-largest city, Cibao qualified by winning the 2017 Caribbean Club Championship – beating San Juan Jabloteh of Trinidad & Tobago 1-0 in May's Final – but the seeds of that success were sown when FIFA commissioned research in 2014 to see if the island could support a professional league.

With FIFA providing financial assistance, a 10-team league was set up. Bauger won the inaugural title, while Cibao were runners-up in 2016 and regular-season winners last year.

Much of Cibao's success has been due to two Haitians, Babalito and Charles Herold Jnr, with Michael Wheeler – a New York-based FIFA match agent from the island who worked with the Federacion Dominicana de Futbol on the league – admitting: "There is a large reliance on foreigners. It is a good thing as the foreign players need to bring up the level of play as FDF youth programmes begin to mature and produce better football players."

The depth of local talent is improving and there were three Dominicans at Real Madrid. However, the country's most promising player, 24-year-old striker Mariano Diaz, who left Real for Lyon, has turned his back on the national team. After scoring on his international debut, against neighbours Haiti in 2013, he has not played since.

"The problem is a necessary structural change in the ranks of the federation," explains Jorge Pulido, a Venezuelan who is the FDF secretary general. "Their bases have aged, we do not have modernity or capacity for change. We are not an attractive country for players like Mariano Diaz.

"I would like him to play with us. I talked to his agent and it will be difficult. Let's wait after Russia 2018, if Spain does not call him there will be hope."

Domestically, the gamble of a professional league appears to be paying off. With crowds growing and averaging 2,500 in 2017 – with 7,000 regularly attending Cibao's games – the league is expanding to 12 teams this year. The season runs from March to September and, with the limit on overseas players being loosened from four to seven non-Dominicans per team, players from Haiti, Colombia and Venezuela are flocking to the island.

David Velastegui, a Canadian midfielder who played for Atletico San Cristobal in 2015 and Delfines del Este in 2016, says: "The top clubs' wages were okay; the lower clubs not as much – unless you are a foreign player and agreed to a better deal.

"Most of the local Dominican players don't get paid much, but the cost of living is very cheap so it's not too bad for them." WS

➤ a 1-0 victory over Strasbourg.
USA: MLS newcomers Los Angeles FC have sold all 17,500 season tickets for the upcoming campaign.

Thursday March 1

CHINA: DR Congo's former Villarreal striker Cedric Bakambu joins Beijing Guoan for what is reported to be an African transfer record of €74m.
FRANCE: Paris Saint-Germain say Neymar will undergo surgery after fracturing a metatarsal in his right foot at the weekend and will be out for up to three months.
IRAN: Esteghlal beat Persepolis 1-0 in the Tehran derby.
TURKEY: Three players are sent off as Besiktas draw 2-2 with Istanbul neighbours Fenerbahce in the first leg of their Turkish Cup semi-final.
USA: Seattle Sounders and New York Red Bulls go through to the CONCACAF Champions League quarter-finals with wins over Santa Tecla and Olimpia respectively.

Friday March 2

CHINA: Defending champions Guangzhou Evergrande start the new season with a 5-4 loss to city rivals Guangzhou R&F.
CROATIA: Perjury charges are filed against Real Madrid's Luka Modric over his testimony about financial deals with former Dinamo Zagreb director Zdravko Mamic, who is charged with embezzlement and tax fraud. If he is found guilty, the midfielder could face up to five years in prison.
GEORGIA: Torpedo Kutaisi open their title defence with a 3-2 loss at home to Dila.
GUINEA: Belgian coach Paul Put, who resigned as Kenya's national boss less than two weeks ago, is named national coach by Guinea.
KOSOVO: Swiss coach Bernard Challandes signs a two-year contract to lead Kosovo.
PORTUGAL: Table-toppers Porto win 2-1 at home to third-place Sporting and remain unbeaten in the league this season.

Saturday March 3

CHINA: Making their CSL debuts for Dalian Yifang, Yannick Carrasco, Nicolas Gaitan and Jose Fonte suffer an 8-0 thrashing at the hands of Shanghai SIPG.
FRANCE: Timothy Weah, the son of George Weah, makes his Ligue 1 debut as Paris Saint-Germain win 2-0 at Troyes.
IFAB: The 132nd annual general

Portugal

TOM KUNDERT

FCP lead the way

Porto look set to break Benfica's winning habit

Despite the perceived drop in quality of Portugal's best clubs – a debate that was sparked by Benfica's early abject campaign and Porto's 5-0 defeat at home to Liverpool in the Champions League – the Primeira Liga has served up an exciting title race this term.

Up until February a three-horse race looked on the cards, with Porto and Sporting swapping first and second place several times, while Benfica hit an impressive run of form to creep up on the leading two.

A surprise defeat for Jorge Jesus' Sporting at Estoril, followed a few weeks later by Porto's 2-1 victory over the Lions at the Estadio do Dragao, effectively knocked the Green and Whites out of contention, but Benfica kept winning, making Porto's trip to Lisbon to face the four-times champions in April a crunch fixture.

Having sold four first-team regulars last summer – keeper Ederson, defenders Nelson Semedo and Victor Lindelof, and striker Kostas Mitroglou – it appeared Benfica had said goodbye to any chance of a successful campaign. However, a poor first half of the season has

Intelligence ...Sergio Conceicao

meeting of the International Football Association Board approves the use of VARs.
ITALY: Juventus win 1-0 at Lazio to go a point behind leaders Napoli, who lose 4-2 at home to Roma.
SOUTH AFRICA: Orlando Pirates beat Kaizer Chiefs 3-1 to reduce Mamelodi Sundowns' lead at the top of the table to four points with seven matches remaining.
USA: Toronto's MLS title defence begins with a 2-0 defeat at home to Columbus Crew.

Sunday March 4

ARGENTINA: Fans of third-tier side Almirante Brown fire shots at the home of the club president and burn a car on his drive after a 2-1 loss to San Miguel.
ENGLAND: Manchester City beat Chelsea 1-0 to go 18 points clear at the top of the Premier League.
ITALY: All the day's Serie A games are cancelled after Fiorentina's Davide Astori, 31, is found dead in his hotel bed ahead of his side's game at Udinese.
SPAIN: The 600th goal of Lionel Messi's career gives league leaders Barcelona a 1-0 win at home to second-place Atletico Madrid.
USA: Los Angeles FC make a winning start to life in MLS, beating Seattle Sounders 1-0.

Monday March 5

ENGLAND: Nemanja Matic gets an injury-time winner as Manchester United come from 2-0 down to beat Crystal Palace 3-2.
ITALY: Following the example of the Premier League, Lega Calcio brings the transfer deadline forward next season, to August 18, with Serie A beginning the following day.

Tuesday March 6

BULGARIA: Levski Sofia call for the resignation of the Bulgarian Football Union refereeing commission after what they believe has been biased officiating during league matches.
CHINA: Ex-Brazil international Ricardo Goulart scores four goals as Guangzhou Evergrande overturn a 2-0 deficit to beat South Korean side Jeju United 5-3 in the Asian Champions League.
ITALY: Fiorentina, where he was captain, and a former club, Cagliari, retire the number 13 shirt following Davide Astori's death. An autopsy reveals he died from natural causes that led to heart problems.
SPAIN: Cristiano Ronaldo equals ➤

Flying high...Porto celebrate a goal against Sporting

actually given Rui Vitoria's team what could prove to be a crucial advantage at the business end of the campaign. Out of Europe by Christmas and exiting both domestic cups in the early rounds, Benfica have been left to focus solely on the league, keeping their squad fresh and relatively injury-free as a result.

In contrast, Porto and Sporting have slugged out four gruelling games against one another, on top of European involvement, and the fixture pile-up is taking its toll, with key players such as Porto's Danilo, Ricardo Pereira and Alex Telles, and Sporting's Bas Dost succumbing to injury. That Porto have been worst affected – free-scoring forwards Vincent Aboubakar, Tiquinho Soares and Moussa Marega were all on the treatment table in early March – is no surprise given the high-intensity, all-out attacking game that coach Sergio Conceicao has got the Dragons playing.

Conceicao has done at a remarkable job given the distinctly unpromising circumstances he inherited. Porto's domestic domination, with 16 championship titles in 22 seasons and international successes, abruptly ended in 2013-14. Four seasons without a trophy, financial meltdown and a series of failed coaching appointments seemed to have marked a definitive shift in the Portuguese football landscape as Benfica swept to four successive title triumphs. Falling foul of UEFA's financial fairplay rules, the northerners had to sell their most valued asset in Andre Silva and were prohibited from buying players.

Conceicao wasn't complaining though. A messy divorce from former club Nantes just weeks after signing a new contract showed how much he wanted the job at the club where he made his name. And the firebrand coach wasted little time in resetting the mindset of a squad that had got accustomed to playing second – even third – fiddle in Portugal. His coaching philosophy demands that his charges show the same committed approach that characterised the former Portugal winger in his playing days. And the effect he has had on Aboubakar, Marega, Telles and Sergio Oliveira, for example, has been truly transformative, with all four enjoying the best seasons of their careers.

While his motivational skills have stood out, Conceicao has also shown tactical intelligence and flexibility when needed, switching between 4-4-2 and 4-3-3, and entrusting players with different tasks and positions in line with the specific needs of each game. "It's impossible to be a winner [as a coach] just by shouting," he has said. "Determination is important, but you have to be intelligent, and players have to take your message on board."

> "Determination is important, but you have to be intelligent, and players have to take your message on board"
> The philosophy of Porto coach Sergio Conceicao

But Benfica's drastic upturn in form, combined with the phenomenal scoring rate of Brazilian striker Jonas, augurs for a thrilling final sprint. The day after Porto saw off Sporting, Benfica thrashed Maritimo 5-0 to make it 19 games without defeat in the league. It is form reminiscent of their epic run in 2015-16, when a sequence of 25 wins, one draw and one defeat in the final 27 Liga games saw the Eagles come from behind to snatch the title from Sporting in coach Vitoria's first season in charge.

"We'll be fighting for this championship with the same determination and conviction with which we won our previous titles," said Vitoria. "We're mentally prepared to achieve our objective."

Four straight championships says he has a point. WS

Impressive...Benfica's Rafa Silva takes on Maritimo

China

CAMERON WILSON

Seven and out?

Rivals are closing in on Guangzhou Evergrande

For most of the last decade, talk at the start of each Chinese Super League season revolves around who will finish in second place behind Guangzhou Evergrande. But this year there is a genuine chance that someone can stop the Cantonese powerhouse from lifting the trophy for the eighth time in a row. Having kicked off a spending revolution, the rest of the CSL is finally catching up with Evergrande.

Dominant ever since they were taken over by Chinese real estate group Evergrande in 2010, their route to success was straightforward: they signed the best foreign players and overseas coaching talent that was willing to come to China, and the best domestic players – which was crucial for a league that requires at least eight Chinese nationals on the pitch. In addition to seven CSL titles, they also won the Asian Champions League twice and Chinese FA Cup twice.

In recent seasons, more clubs have followed Evergrande's free-spending model in the hope of emulating their success. But the winds of change are blowing through Chinese football.

Last year the Chinese FA introduced new rules that have seen big-money transfers now frowned upon, with youth development taking centre stage, and teams must now use at least three under-23 players in CSL games.

Guangzhou Evergrande are still favourites this year – but only just. Former Celtic midfielder Zheng Zhi remains the dynamo of the side, but at 38 his time is nearly over, while internationals Gao Lin, Feng Xiaoting, Yu Hanchao and Huang Bowen are all the wrong side of 30. Consequently, Evergrande are focusing on young talent, such as 23-year-old right-back Deng Hanwen who was signed from newly promoted Beijng Renhe.

What may finally close the gap this year is the club's change in foreign-player transfer policy. In the past, Evergrande brought in players such as Paulinho, who proved that China was no career graveyard or retirement league by moving from the CSL to play in La Liga for Barcelona last year. However, Evergrande's replacement for the man Barcelona paid €40million for is a Serb who struggled to get a game for CSL basement club Tianjian Teda.

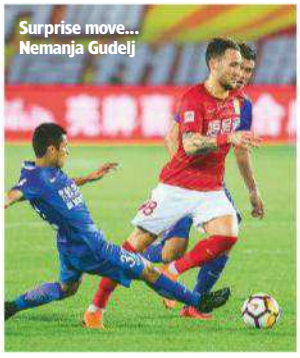
Nemanja Gudelj is no slouch, having made his name at Ajax, but in the context of free-spending Evergrande his acquisition shocked the Chinese sports media. It was felt that he was not up to the usual calibre of foreign imports and many wondered if this means Evergrande chairman Xu Jiayin is scaling back his interest in football.

What's more likely is that Xu, ever one to toe the line when it comes to politics in China, is closely following the CFA's – and in effect the Chinese government's – wishes by spending more modestly and focusing on youth. Regardless, Evergrande are weaker than they were a year ago – a fact illustrated by a 5-4 loss to city rivals R&F on the opening day of the season.

Chief participants in the quest to usurp Evergrande are Shanghai SIPG and Tianjian Quanjin. The former made no transfer moves at all, but did replace Andre Villas-Boas with former Porto, Fenerbahce and Munich 1860 coach Vitor Pereira. He can rely on the good foundations laid last year as SIPG were CSL and CFA Cup runners-up, and made the semi-finals of the Asian Champions League. Former Chelsea star Oscar and

Stars...Hulk (left) and Oscar of Shanghai SIPG

The winds of change are blowing through Chinese football...big-money transfers are now frowned upon, with youth development taking centre stage



Surprise move... Nemanja Gudelj

Good start... Axel Witsel celebrates scoring for Tianjin Quanjian on the opening weekend of the season

ex-Zenit striker Hulk, along with Wu Lei, are key, as is the under-rated Odil Ahmedov, an Uzbek international midfielder formerly of Russian side Krasnodar.

In only their second season in the CSL, Tianjin Quanjian will look to go even better than their third-place finish last year. Former Leicester City and Fiorentina coach Paulo Sousa takes over from Fabio Cannavaro, who left to rejoin Evergrande, and his squad includes Brazilian striker Alexandre Pato and Belgium international Alex Witsel.

Other contenders for the top-four spots include traditional powerhouses Beijing Guoan and Shandong Luneng, plus Guangzhou R&F and Hebei China Fortune. The latter have Manuel Pellegrini in charge, while Beijing Guoan bucked the subdued trend in the recent transfer window by signing Cedric Bakambu.

Elsewhere, Shanghai Shenhua bid farewell to Carlos Tevez and had a quiet transfer window. Last year's CFA Cup winners are back in the Asian Champions League for the first time since 2011, but few expect them to go far in any competition this year.

Finally, Dalian Yifang are back in the top flight for the first time in three years and made an impressive pair of signings with Nicolas Gaitan and Yannick Carrasco from Atletico Madrid. However, their hopes of staying up were not helped by an 8-0 thrashing at Shanghai SIPG on the opening weekend of the season. WS

➤ Ruud Van Nistelrooy's record of scoring in nine Champions League games in a row as Real Madrid reach their eighth consecutive quarter-finals with a 2-1 victory away to Paris Saint-Germain.

USA: New York Red Bulls are the first MLS side to win a CONCACAF Champions League knockout game in Mexico, beating Tijuana 2-0.

Wednesday March 7

ENGLAND: In the Champions League, Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur both lose 2-1 at home, but while City progress by beating Basle 5-2 on aggregate, Spurs go out 4-3 to Juventus.

Thursday March 8

AUSTRALIA: Current Sydney coach Graham Arnold will replace Bert Van Marwijk as national team boss after the World Cup finals.

Friday March 9

FRANCE: Ligue 2's Tours announce the death of 18-year-old defender Thomas Rodriguez but release no further details.

ITALY: Cagliari midfielder Joao Pedro is handed a provisional suspension for failing a drugs test after the 0-0 draw at Sassuolo on February 11.

Saturday March 10

BELGIUM: Cercle Brugge clinch promotion with a 3-1 play-off victory over Beerschot Wilrijk to secure a 3-2 win on aggregate. KV Mechelen are relegated after Eupen beat Mouscron 4-0 to stay up on goal difference.

ENGLAND: Marcus Rashford scores twice as Manchester United beat Liverpool 2-1 and move five points clear of their rivals in second place.

FRANCE: Lille supporters run onto the pitch and attack their own players at the end of a 1-1 draw at home to Montpellier.

GERMANY: Robert Lewandowski gets a hat-trick to reach 100 goals in the Bundesliga as Bayern Munich beat Hamburg 6-0.

NORWAY: There are calls for future domestic campaigns to start later after this season's opening game, between newly promoted Ranheim and Brann, is postponed due to adverse weather conditions.

SPAIN: Lionel Messi misses Barcelona's 2-0 victory at Malaga to be at the birth of his third son.

Sunday March 11

ENGLAND: Petr Cech saves a penalty and is the first man to keep 200 Premier League clean sheets as Arsenal beat Watford 3-0.

GREECE: PAOK's game with AEK is abandoned after their president, Ivan Savvidis, invades the pitch with a gun after his side have a late goal disallowed with the score at 0-0.

ITALY: Playing their first game since Davide Astori's death, Fiorentina beat Benevento 1-0 in a game that is stopped in the 13th minute – their former captain's shirt number – for 60 seconds of applause.

KAZAKHSTAN: Defending league champions Astana began the new season with a 3-0 victory at home to Akzhayik.

SCOTLAND: Ten-man Celtic twice come from behind to beat Rangers 3-2 at Ibrox and stretch their lead to nine points in the Premiership.

Monday March 12

EGYPT: A 0-0 draw between Al Masry and El Entag El Harby sees Al Ahly secure their 40th Egyptian league title.

ENGLAND: Southampton sack manager Mauricio Pellegrino with the team just one point and one place above the relegation zone with eight games to play.

GERMANY: Hamburg put under-21 coach Christian Titz in charge for the remaining eight games of the season after Bernd Hollerbach is sacked for failing to win any of his seven Bundesliga matches since being appointed on January 22.

GREECE: All Superleague games are suspended indefinitely after PAOK president Ivan Savvidis' pitch invasion with a gun on Sunday.

QATAR: Youssef El Arabi scores twice in injury time as Al Duhail beat Lokomotiv Tashkent 2-1 in Uzbekistan to become the first side to qualify from the group stage of the AFC Champions League.

USA: Having turned 40 on Sunday, former Chelsea and Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba, who is now player-owner of USL side Rising Pheonix, says he will retire at the end of the season. WS

Double...Al Duhail's Youssef El Arabi

Club football

AFRICA

CAF SUPER CUP

(Champions League holders Wydad Casablanca v Confederation Cup holders TP Mazembe)

Feb 24 - Casablanca
Wydad Casablanca (Mor) 1 (Tighazoui 83)
TP Mazembe (DRC) 0
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 45,000. **Ref:** Sikazwe (Zam)
Wydad: Laaroubi - Noussir, Atouchi, Comara, Nahiri, Tighazoui (Aarab 90+3), Nekkach, Saidi, El Haddad, Chikatara (Quintana 63), El Karti (El Hassouni 70).
TP Mazembe: Gbohouo - Mpeko, Kimwaki, Chongo, Zola, Kanda (Sissoko 66), Mika, Koffi (Mondeko 68), Meschak (Muleka 82), Malango, Kalaba.

CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Preliminary round

1st legs - Feb10/11; 2nd legs - Feb 20-24
AC Leopards (Con) v Togo Port (Tog)
2-1, 1-2 (agg 3-3, Togo Port 4-3 on pens)
Al Tahadi (Lby) v Aduana Stars (Gha)
1-0, 0-2 (agg 1-2)
AS Otoho (Con) v MC Alger (Alg)
2-0, 0-9 (agg 2-9)
AS Vita (DRC) v Be Forward Wanderers (Mwi)
4-0, 2-1 (agg 6-1)
Bantu (Les) v Mbabane Swallows (Swa)
2-4, 3-1 (agg 5-5, Mbabane on away goals)
Bidvest Wits (SAf) v Pamplemousses (Mrs)
2-0, 0-1 (agg 2-1)
Buffles (Ben) v ASEC Abidjan (IvC)
1-1, 2-3 (agg 3-4)
CNaPS Sport (Mad) v KCCA (Uga)
2-1, 0-1 (agg 2-2, KCCA on away goals)
Concorde (Mra) v Esperance Tunis (Tun)
1-1, 0-5 (agg 1-6)
Difaa El Jadida (Mor) v SB Benfica (GuB)
10-0, 0-0 (agg 10-0)
ES Setif (Alg) v Olympique Real (CAR)
6-0, 0-0 (agg 6-0)
FAN (Nig) v Horoya (Gui) 1-3, 0-0 (agg 1-3)
Generation Foot (Sen) v Misr El Makasa (Egy)
2-0, 0-0 (agg 2-0)
Gor Mahia (Ken) v Leones Vegetarianos (EqG)
2-0, 1-1 (agg 3-1)
JKU (Zan) v Zesco United (Zam) 0-0, 0-7 (agg 0-7)
LISCR (Lbr) v Al Hilal Omdurman (Sud)
1-0, 0-3 (agg 1-3)
Ngaya (Com) v Uniao Songo (Moz)
1-1, 0-2 (agg 1-3)
Plateau United (Nga) v Eding Sport (Cam)
3-0, 1-0 (agg 4-0)
Primeiro Agosto (Ang) v FC Platinum (Zim)
3-0, 2-1 (agg 5-1)
Rail Club du Kadiogo (BuF) v Mounana (Gab)
1-0, 0-2 (agg 1-2)
Rayon Sports (Rwa) v LLB Academic (Bdi)
1-1, 1-0 (agg 2-1)
Real Bamako (Mli) v MFM (Nga) 1-1, 0-1 (agg 1-2)
Stade Malien (Mli) v WAC (IvC) 1-1, 0-1 (agg 1-2)
Township Rollers (Bot) v Al Merreikh Omd'n (Sud)
3-0, 1-1 (agg 4-2)
Young Africans (Tan) v St Louis Suns (Sey)
1-0, 1-1 (agg 2-1)
Zanaco (Zam) v Armed Forces (Gam)
3-0, 3-1 (agg 6-1)

Saint George (Eth) v El-Salam Wau (SSu) – *El-Salam Wau were eliminated from the competition after failing to show up for the1st leg in Ethiopia; Saint George went through*

Byes to next round: *Al Ahly (Egy), Etoile Sahel (Tun), Mamelodi Sundowns (SAf), TP Mazembe (DRC), Wydad Casablanca (Mor, holders)*

CONFEDERATION CUP

Preliminary round

1st legs - Feb 9-11; 2nd legs - Feb19-21
Africa Sports (IvC) v Nouadhibou (Mra) 1-1, 0-1 (agg 1-2); Akwa United (Nga) v Banjul Hawks (Gam) 1-2, 2-0 (agg 3-2); Al Ittihad (Lby) v Sahel (Nig) 1-0, 3-0 (agg 4-0); Al Masry (Egy) v Green Buffaloes (Zam) 4-0, 1-2 (agg 5-2); APR (Rwa) v Anse Reunion (Sey) 4-0, 2-1 (agg 6-1); Asante Kotoko (Gha) v CARA (Con) 1-0, 0-1 (agg 1-1, CARA 7-6 on pens); Costa do Sol (Moz) v Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 1-0, 1-0 (agg 2-0); Energie (Ben) v Hafia (Gui) 1-0, 1-1 (agg 2-1); Leopards (Ken) v Fosa Juniors (Mad) 1-1, 0-0 (agg 1-1, Fosa Juniors on away goals); Mangasport (Gab) v Maniema Union (DRC) 0-1, 1-1 (agg 1-2); New Star (Cam) v Deportivo Niefang (EqG) 2-1, 0-1 (agg 2-2, Deportivo Niefang on away goals); Ngazi Sport (Com) v AS Port-Louis 2000 (Mrs) 1-1, 1-4 (agg 2-5); Olympic Star (Bdi) v Etoile Filante (BuF) 0-0, 1-0 (agg 1-0); Onze Createurs (Mli) v CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1-1, 0-2 (agg 1-3); Petro Atletico (Ang) v Masters Security (Mwi) 5-0, 0-0 (agg 5-0); RS Berkane (Mor) v Mbour Petite Cote (Sen) 2-1, 1-1 (agg 3-2); Simba (Tan) v Gendarmerie Nationale (Dji) 4-0, 1-0 (agg 5-0); Tanda (IvC) v La Mancha (Con) 0-0, 0-1 (agg 0-1); Young Buffaloes (Swa) v Cape Town City (SAf) 0-1, 0-1 (agg 0-2); Zimamoto (Zan) v Welayta Dicha (Eth) 1-1, 0-1 (agg 1-2)

Ben Guerdane (Tun) v Al Hilal Juba (SSu) – *Al Hilal Juba were eliminated from the competition after failing to show up for the1st leg in Tunisia; Ben Guerdane went through*

Djoliba (Mli) v ELWA United (Lbr) – *ELWA United withdrew; Djoliba went through*

Byes to next round: *Al Ahli Shendi (Sud), Al Hilal Obayed (Sud), Club Africain (Tun), DC Motema Pembe (DRC), Enyimba (Nga), Nkana (Zam), Raja Casablanca (Mor), SuperSport United (SAf), USM Alger (Alg), Zamalek (Egy)*

CONCACAF

CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

1st round

1st legs - Feb 20-22; 2nd legs - Feb 27-Mar1
Cibao (DoR) v Guadalajara (Mex)
0-2, 0-5 (agg 0-7)
Colorado Rapids (USA) v Toronto (Can)
0-2, 0-0 (agg 0-2)
Herediano (CR) v Tigres (Mex) 2-2, 1-3 (agg 3-5)
Motagua (Hnd) v Tijuana (Mex) 0-1, 1-1 (agg 1-2)
Olimpia (Hnd) v New York Red Bulls (USA)
1-1, 0-2 (agg 1-3)
Santa Tecla (ESv) v Seattle Sounders (USA)
2-1, 0-4 (agg 2-5)
Saprissa (CR) v America (Mex) 1-5, 1-1 (agg 2-6)
Tauro (Pan) v Dallas (USA)
1-0, 2-3 (agg 3-3, Tauro on away goals)

EUROPE

EUROPA LEAGUE

1st knockout round (last 32)

1st legs - Feb13/15; 2nd legs - Feb 21/22
AEK Athens (Gre) v Dynamo Kiev (Ukr)
1-1, 0-0 (agg 1-1, Dynamo on away goals)
Astana (Kaz) v Sporting Lisbon (Por)
1-3, 3-3 (agg 4-6)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) v Atalanta (Ita)
3-2, 1-1 (agg 4-3)
Celtic (Sco) v Zenit St Petersburg (Rus)
1-0, 0-3 (agg 1-3)
Copenhagen (Den) v Atletico Madrid (Spa)
1-4, 0-1 (agg 1-5)
FCSB (Rom) v Lazio (Ita) 1-0, 1-5 (agg 2-5)
Ludogorets (Bul) v Milan (Ita) 0-3, 0-1 (agg 0-4)
Lyon (Fra) v Villarreal (Spa) 3-1, 1-0 (agg 4-1)
Marseille (Fra) v Sporting Braga (Por)
3-0, 0-1 (agg 3-1)
Napoli (Ita) v RB Leipzig (Ger)
1-3, 2-0 (agg 3-3, Leipzig on away goals)
Nice (Fra) v Lokomotiv Moscow (Rus)
2-3, 0-1 (agg 2-4)
Ostersund (Swe) v Arsenal (Eng)
0-3, 2-1 (agg 2-4)
Partizan Belgrade (Ser) v Viktoria Plzen (CzR)
1-1, 0-2 (agg 1-3)
Real Sociedad (Spa) v Salzburg (Aut)
2-2, 1-2 (agg 3-4)
Red Star Belgrade (Ser) v CSKA Moscow (Rus)
0-0, 0-1 (agg 0-1)
Spartak Moscow (Rus) v Athletic Bilbao (Spa)
1-3, 2-1 (agg 3-4)

SOUTH AMERICA

LIBERTADORES CUP

1st qualifying round

1st legs - Jan 22; 2nd legs - Jan 26
Macara (Ecu) v Deportivo Tachira (Ven)
1-1, 0-0 (agg 1-1, Dep Tachira on away goals)
Montevideo Wanderers (Uru) v Olimpia (Par)
0-0, 0-2 (agg 0-2)
Oriente Petrolero (Bol) v Universitario (Per)
2-0, 1-3 (agg 3-3, Oriente on away goals)

2nd qualifying round

1st legs - Jan 30-Feb1; 2nd legs - Feb 6-8
Banfield (Arg) v Independiente del Valle (Ecu)
1-1, 2-2 (agg 3-3, Banfield on away goals)
Carabobo (Ven) v Guarani (Par) 1-0, 0-6 (agg 1-6)
Chapecoense (Bra) v Nacional (Uru)
0-1, 0-1 (agg 0-2)
Deportivo Tachira v Santa Fe (Col)
2-3, 0-0 (agg 2-3)
Olimpia v Junior (Col) 1-0, 1-3 (agg 2-3)
Oriente Petrolero v Jorge Wilstermann (Bol)
1-2, 2-2 (agg 3-4)
Santiago Wanderers (Chl) v Melgar (Per)
1-1, 1-0 (agg 2-1)
Univ de Concepcion (Chl) v Vasco da Gama (Bra)
0-4, 0-2 (agg 0-6)

Final qualifying round

1st legs - Feb13-15; 2nd legs - Feb 20-22
Banfield v Nacional 2-2, 0-1 (agg 2-3)
Junior v Guarani 1-0, 0-0 (agg 1-0)
Santiago Wanderers v Santa Fe 1-2, 0-3 (agg 1-5)
Vasco da Gama v Jorge Wilstermann
4-0, 0-4 (agg 4-4, Vasco 3-2 on pens)

● *Winners qualified for group stage; the 2 best-performing losers (Jorge Wilstermann & Banfield) enter Sudamericana Cup in 2nd round*

ASIA

AFC CUP

1st preliminary round

1st legs - Jan 23; 2nd legs - Jan 30
Dordoi (Kyr) v Ahal (Tkm) 1-3, 2-2 (agg 3-5)
Saif (Ban) v TC Sports (Mdv) 0-1, 1-3 (agg 1-4)
Transport United (Bhu) v Bengaluru (Ind)
0-0, 0-3 (agg 0-3)

Final preliminary round

1st legs - Jan 22-Feb13; 2nd legs - Jan 29-Feb 20
Ahal v Khujand (Taj) 1-0, 2-0 (agg 3-0)
Boeung Ket Angkor (Cmb) v Lao Toyota (Lao)
3-3, 1-0 (agg 4-3)
Erchim (Mon) v Hwaebul (NKo) 0-4, 0-3 (agg 0-7)
Hilal Al Quds (Pal) v Al Suwaiq (Oma)
0-1, 1-1 (agg 1-2)
TC Sports v Bengaluru 2-3, 0-5 (agg 2-8)

● *Winners qualified for the group stage*

BRUNEI

2017-18 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
MS ABDB (C)	20	16	2	2	71	9	50
Kota Ranger	20	14	5	1	56	22	47
Indera	20	13	5	2	64	17	44
Kasuka	20	9	7	4	41	32	34
Wijaya	20	10	0	10	31	37	30
Tabuan Muda A	20	5	9	6	30	38	24
Lun Bawang	20	6	5	9	43	42	23
MS PDB	20	5	7	8	30	38	22
Najip	20	3	3	14	21	51	12
Menglait (R)	20	3	2	15	18	85	11
Jerudong (R)	20	3	1	16	26	60	10

INDIA (I-League)

2017-18 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Minerva P (C)	18	11	2	5	24	16	35
NEROCA	18	9	5	4	20	13	32
Mohun Bagan	18	8	7	3	28	14	31
East Bengal	18	8	7	3	32	19	31
Aizawl	18	6	6	6	21	18	24
Shill'g Lajong	18	6	4	8	17	25	22
Gokulam	18	6	3	9	17	23	21
Chennai City	18	4	7	7	15	24	19
Churchill B (R)[1]	18	5	2	11	17	28	17
Indian Arrows[1]	18	4	3	11	13	24	15

[1] *Churchill Brothers were relegated because Indian Arrows are the federation's development squad, comprising U-17 and U-19 internationals, which is immune from relegation*

SRI LANKA

2017-18 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Colombo (C)	17	12	4	1	46	11	40
Renown	17	12	4	1	44	18	40
New Young's	17	9	5	3	33	15	32
Super Sun	17	9	4	4	27	17	31
Pelicans	17	8	5	4	24	16	29
Air Force	17	7	7	3	24	14	28
Matara City	17	7	6	4	28	17	27
Solid	17	6	5	6	26	28	23
Army	17	6	4	7	26	17	22
Saunders	17	5	7	5	21	23	22
Navy	17	6	2	9	23	26	20
Upc'try Lions	17	6	2	9	36	51	20
Blue Star	17	4	6	7	18	27	18
Java Lane	17	4	5	8	19	30	17
Negombo Yth	17	5	2	10	24	41	17
Crystal Palace	17	4	4	9	23	39	16
Police (R)	17	4	1	12	18	41	13
Morag'ulla (R)	17	1	3	13	19	48	6

OCEANIA

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group stage

Group A
Played in Port Vila, Vanuatu
Feb 10: Tupapa Maraerenga (Coo) 2 Toti City (PNG) 7; Nalkutan (Van) 1 Ba (Fij) 0.
Feb 13: Toti City 1 Ba 0; Tupapa Maraerenga 0 Nalkutan 4.
Feb 16: Ba 4 Tupapa Maraerenga 1; Toti City 1 Nalkutan 4.

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP A – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nalkutan (Q)	3	3	0	0	9	1	9
Toti City (Q)	3	2	0	1	9	6	6
Ba	3	1	0	2	4	3	3
Tupapa M	3	0	0	3	3	15	0

Group B
Played in Pirae, Tahiti
Feb 11: Erakor Golden Star (Van) 2 Solomon Warriors (Sol) 0; Dragon (Tah) 4 Lossi (NC) 0.
Feb 14: Solomon Warriors 6 Lossi 1; Erakor Golden Star 3 Dragon 4.
Feb 17: Lossi 2 Erakor Golden Star 2; Solomon Warriors 2 Dragon 1.

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP B – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dragon (Q)	3	2	0	1	9	5	6
Sol Warriors (Q)	3	2	0	1	8	4	6
Erakor G Star	3	1	1	1	7	6	4
Lossi	3	0	1	2	3	12	1

Group C
Played in Auckland, New Zealand
Feb 25: Lautoka (Fij) 3 Madang (PNG) 1; Venus (Tah) 0 Auckland City (NZ) 7.
Feb 28: Venus 1 Lautoka 2; Auckland City 5 Madang 0.
Mar 3: Madang 1 Venus 2; Auckland City 1 Lautoka 0.

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP C – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland C (Q)	3	3	0	0	13	0	9
Lautoka (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Venus	3	1	0	2	3	10	3
Madang	3	0	0	3	2	10	0

Group D
Played in Honiara, Solomon Islands
Feb 24: Magenta (NC) 2 Lupe Ole Soaga (Soa) 0; Marist (Sol) 1 Team Wellington (NZ) 1.
Feb 27: Team Wellington 7 Lupe Ole Soaga 1; Marist 1 Magenta 1.
Mar 2: Team Wellington 5 Magenta 1; Lupe Ole Soaga 1 Marist 3.

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP D – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
T Well'ton (Q)	3	2	1	0	13	3	7
Marist (Q)	3	1	2	0	5	3	5
Magenta	3	1	1	1	4	6	4
Lupe O Soaga	3	0	0	3	2	12	0

● *Top 2 in each group qualified for quarter-finals*

Quarter-finals draw

Auckland City v Solomon Warriors
Dragon v Lautoka
Nalkutan v Marist
Team Wellington v Toti City
Single-leg ties, to be played Apr 7/8

Internationals

FRIENDLIES

Monday, February 26

Feb 26 - Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 3 (Omar Hawsawi 10, Al Jassim 57, M Assiri 88)
Moldova 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 6,914. **Ref:** Gil (Pol)
Saudi Arabia: Al Owais - Al Shahrani, Osama Hawsawi (M Hawsawi 69), Omar Hawsawi, Al Harbi, Al Khaibri (Ghaleb 46), Al Jassim (Jaafer 75), Otayf, Al Mogahwi (Kanno 46), Al Moasher (Kuwaykibi 46), Al Sahlawi (M Assiri 81).
Moldova: S Pascenco - A Macritchii, Racu, Bogdan (Rogac 46), Jardan, Cojocari, A Pascenco (Rata 65), Platica (V Macritchii 82), Spataru (Ambros 46), Boiciuc (Vremea 70), Damascan (Paireli 56).

Wednesday, February 28

Feb 28 - Basra
Iraq 4 (Al Yami og 21, Mohsin 47, M Ali 51, 73)
Saudi Arabia 1 (Fallatah 57)
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 59,694. **Ref:** Al Jenaibi (UAE)
Iraq: Hameed - Faez (Abdul-Ridha 89), Nadhim, Mhawi (M Mohammed 84), Tariq, H Ali (K Mohammed 69), Kamel (Kasim 81), Kadhim, Mohsin, A Hussein (Salem 5), M Ali (Husni 79).
Saudi Arabia: Abdullah (Atiah 55) - Fallatah, Al Zori (Al Mowalad 46), Ahmad Assiri, Al Yami (Jahfali 56), Al Shalhoub (Al Shamrani 55), Al Fraidi (Bakshween 74), Al Khaibri, Ghaleb (Abusaban 69), Al Raheb, Kuwaykibi.

2019 ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

3rd round

● *Remaining games (to be played on Mar 27, 2018 unless otherwise stated) are listed under group tables*

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
India (QF)	5	4	1	0	10	3	13
Kyrgyzstan	4	2	1	1	7	6	7
Myanmar	4	1	2	1	8	5	5
Macau	5	0	0	5	4	15	0

Kyrgyzstan v Myanmar (Mar 22); Kyrgyzstan v India; Myanmar v Macau

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lebanon (QF)	5	4	1	0	12	3	13
North Korea	5	2	2	1	11	10	8
Hong Kong	5	1	2	2	4	5	5
Malaysia	5	0	1	4	4	13	1

Lebanon v Malaysia; North Korea v Hong Kong

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jordan (QF)	5	3	2	0	15	4	11
Vietnam (QF)	5	2	3	0	8	2	9
Cambodia	5	1	0	4	2	15	3
Afghanistan	5	0	3	2	5	9	3

Afghanistan v Cambodia; Jordan v Vietnam

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Palestine (QF)	5	5	0	0	25	2	15
Oman (QF)	5	4	0	1	27	5	12
Maldives	5	1	0	4	4	19	3
Bhutan	5	0	0	5	2	32	0

Maldives v Bhutan; Oman v Palestine

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bahrain (QF)	5	3	1	1	11	3	10
Turk'stan (QF)	5	3	1	1	9	6	10
Taiwan	5	2	0	3	6	12	6
Singapore	5	0	2	3	3	8	2

Bahrain v Turkmenistan; Taiwan v Singapore

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Philippines	5	2	3	0	11	7	9
Yemen	5	1	4	0	5	4	7
Tajikistan	5	2	1	2	9	7	7
Nepal	5	0	2	3	2	9	2

Philippines v Tajikistan; Yemen v Nepal

● *The top 2 in each group will qualify for the 24-team finals; 12 other countries have already qualified – Australia, China, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Syria, Thailand, UAE (hosts) & Uzbekistan*

2019 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS

● *Remaining games are listed under group tables. Dates are:* **round 2**, *Sep 3-11, 2018;* **rounds 3 & 4**, *Oct 8-16, 2018;* **round 5**, *Nov 12-20, 2018;* **round 6**, *Mar 18-26, 2019*

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Madagascar	1	1	0	0	3	1	3
Sudan	1	0	0	1	1	3	0
Equat Guinea	1	0	0	1	0	3	0

Rnd 2: *Equatorial Guinea v Sudan; Madagascar v Senegal.* **Rnd 3:** *Equatorial Guinea v Madagascar; Senegal v Sudan.* **Rnd 4:** *Madagascar v Equatorial Guinea; Sudan v Senegal.* **Rnd 5:** *Equatorial Guinea v Senegal; Madagascar v Sudan.* **Rnd 6:** *Senegal v Madagascar; Sudan v Equatorial Guinea.*

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cameroon (QF)[1]	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Malawi	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Comoros	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Morocco	1	0	0	1	0	1	0

[1] *Cameroon have already qualified as finals hosts*
Rnd 2: *Comoros v Cameroon; Morocco v Malawi.* **Rnd 3:** *Cameroon v Malawi; Morocco v Comoros.* **Rnd 4:** *Comoros v Morocco; Malawi v Cameroon.* **Rnd 5:** *Comoros v Malawi; Morocco v Cameroon.* **Rnd 6:** *Cameroon v Comoros; Malawi v Morocco.*

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Burundi	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Mali	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Gabon	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
South Sudan	1	0	0	1	0	3	0

Rnd 2: *Gabon v Burundi; South Sudan v Mali.*
Rnd 3: *Gabon v South Sudan; Mali v Burundi.*
Rnd 4: *Burundi v Mali; South Sudan v Gabon.*
Rnd 5: *Gabon v Mali; South Sudan v Burundi.*
Rnd 6: *Burundi v Gabon; Mali v South Sudan.*

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Benin	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Gambia	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Togo	1	0	0	1	0	1	0

Rnd 2: *Gambia v Algeria; Togo v Benin.*
Rnd 3: *Algeria v Benin; Togo v Gambia.*
Rnd 4: *Benin v Algeria; Gambia v Togo.*
Rnd 5: *Gambia v Benin; Togo v Algeria.*
Rnd 6: *Algeria v Gambia; Benin v Togo.*

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Libya	1	1	0	0	5	1	3
South Africa	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Nigeria	1	0	0	1	0	2	0
Seychelles	1	0	0	1	1	5	0

Rnd 2: *Seychelles v Nigeria; South Africa v Libya.*
Rnd 3: *Nigeria v Libya; South Africa v Seychelles.*
Rnd 4: *Libya v Nigeria; Seychelles v South Africa.*
Rnd 5: *Seychelles v Libya; South Africa v Nigeria.*
Rnd 6: *Libya v South Africa; Nigeria v Seychelles.*

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ghana	1	1	0	0	5	0	3
Sierra Leone	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Kenya	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
Ethiopia	1	0	0	1	0	5	0

Rnd 2: *Ethiopia v Sierra Leone; Kenya v Ghana.*
Rnd 3: *Ethiopia v Kenya; Ghana v Sierra Leone.*
Rnd 4: *Kenya v Ethiopia; Sierra Leone v Ghana.*
Rnd 5: *Ethiopia v Ghana; Kenya v Sierra Leone.*
Rnd 6: *Ghana v Kenya; Sierra Leone v Ethiopia.*

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zimbabwe	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
DR Congo	1	1	0	0	3	1	3
Congo	1	0	0	1	1	3	0
Liberia	1	0	0	1	0	3	0

Rnd 2: *Congo v Zimbabwe; Liberia v DR Congo.*
Rnd 3: *Congo v Liberia; DR Congo v Zimbabwe.*
Rnd 4: *Liberia v Congo; Zimbabwe v DR Congo.*
Rnd 5: *Congo v DR Congo; Liberia v Zimbabwe.*
Rnd 6: *DR Congo v Liberia; Zimbabwe v Congo.*

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guinea	1	1	0	0	3	2	3
Cent Af Rep	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Ivory Coast	1	0	0	1	2	3	0
Rwanda	1	0	0	1	1	2	0

Rnd 2: *Guinea v Central African Republic; Rwanda v Ivory Coast.* **Rnd 3:** *Guinea v Rwanda; Ivory Coast v Central African Republic.* **Rnd 4:** *Central African Republic v Ivory Coast; Rwanda v Guinea.* **Rnd 5:** *Guinea v Ivory Coast; Rwanda v Central African Republic.* **Rnd 6:** *Central African Republic v Guinea; Ivory Coast v Rwanda.*

Group I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Burkina Faso	1	1	0	0	3	1	3
Mauritania	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Botswana	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Angola	1	0	0	1	1	3	0

Rnd 2: *Angola v Botswana; Mauritania v Burkina Faso.* **Rnd 3:** *Angola v Mauritania; Burkina Faso v Botswana.* **Rnd 4:** *Botswana v Burkina Faso; Mauritania v Angola.*
Rnd 5: *Angola v Burkina Faso; Mauritania v Botswana.* **Rnd 6:** *Botswana v Angola; Burkina Faso v Mauritania.*

Group J

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Niger	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Swaziland	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Egypt	1	0	0	1	0	1	0

Rnd 2: *Egypt v Niger; Swaziland v Tunisia.*
Rnd 3: *Egypt v Swaziland; Tunisia v Niger.*
Rnd 4: *Niger v Tunisia; Swaziland v Egypt.*
Rnd 5: *Egypt v Tunisia; Swaziland v Niger.*
Rnd 6: *Niger v Egypt; Tunisia v Swaziland.*

Group K

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mozambique	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Guinea-Bissau	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Namibia	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Zambia	1	0	0	1	0	1	0

Rnd 2: *Mozambique v Guinea-Bissau; Namibia v Zambia.* **Rnd 3:** *Mozambique v Namibia; Zambia v Guinea-Bissau.* **Rnd 4:** *Guinea-Bissau v Zambia; Namibia v Mozambique.*
Rnd 5: *Mozambique v Zambia; Namibia v Guinea-Bissau.* **Rnd 6:** *Guinea-Bissau v Mozambique; Zambia v Namibia.*

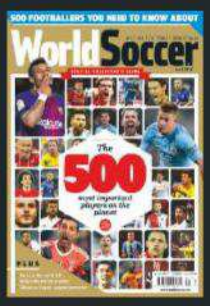
Group L

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uganda	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Lesotho	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Tanzania	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Cape Verde Is	1	0	0	1	0	1	0

Rnd 2: *Lesotho v Cape Verde Islands; Uganda v Tanzania.* **Rnd 3:** *Cape Verde Islands v Tanzania; Uganda v Lesotho.* **Rnd 4:** *Lesotho v Uganda; Tanzania v Cape Verde Islands.* **Rnd 5:** *Lesotho v Tanzania; Uganda v Cape Verde Islands.*
Rnd 6: *Cape Verde Islands v Lesotho; Tanzania v Uganda.*

● *The12 group winners and the 3 runners-up with the best record will qualify for the16-team finals. Hosts Cameroon qualify automatically, even though they are taking part in qualifying group B*

KEY TO TABLES
(C) = champions
(R) = relegated
(QF) = qualified for finals
(Q) = enter next stage



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Fiery... Partizan's Marko Jevtovic (left) battles with Filip Stojkovic of Red Star in December's derby

RED STAR v PARTIZAN

Belgrade's Eternal derby

While basketball, volleyball and handball games between Belgrade's two big sporting institutions are ferociously intense in their own right, nothing matches the meeting of the clubs' football teams.

Although their home grounds sit less than 400metres apart in the Serbian capital, Red Star and Partizan are anything but close.

Clashes between the pair are often marred by fan violence – and not always between those on opposing sides either, with fights known to break out between rival factions of the same club's followers.

Formed within five months of each other in 1945, Red Star were founded by the Serbian United Anti-Fascist Youth League and enjoyed a close relationship with the government's interior ministry, while Partizan were set up by the Yugoslav People's Army and named in honour of the Partisans – communists who fought against fascism during World War II.

Since the 1992 break-up of Yugoslavia, the pair have won every Serbian league title between them bar one – in 1998 when tiny Obilic, who were run by paramilitary leader Arkan were champions amid tales of threats and intimidation.

At present it's honours even with 27 league championships each (including Yugoslavian titles), although Partizan have had the upper hand of late, winning eight of the last 10 Serbian SuperLiga crowns. WS

Same side...police make arrests after Partizan fans fight one another

ON BOTH SIDES

MILOVAN CIRIC
● 1946-47; 1954-57 & 1975-76 (coach)
● 1947-48; 1953-54 (coach)

VELIBOR VASOVIC
● 1958-63 & 1964-66; 1971-73 (coach)
● 1963; 1986-88 (coach)

MILKO DJUROVSKI
● 1979-86
● 1986-90

VLADIMIR STOJKOVIC
● 2001-03; 2005-06
● 2010-13; 2017-present

CLEO
● 2008-09
● 2009-11

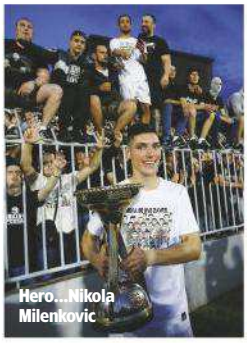
CLASSIC ENCOUNTERS

1947 Jan 5
In the first match between the two sides, Red Star win 4-3 away to Partizan and to this day they still lead their rivals in head-to-head victories, by 62 to 46.

1953 Dec 6
Partizan hand out a 7-1 thrashing to their rivals – the biggest ever win in the fixture's history.

1976 Nov 7
A record crowd of 90,142 witnesses Red Star's 1-0 triumph, although estimates suggest that in excess of another 10,000 fans managed to get into the Red Star Stadium without a ticket.

2017 May 27
Nikola Milenkovic's header gives Partizan a 1-0 victory in the Serbian Cup Final to complete the domestic double.



Hero...Nikola Milenkovic

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